Ernest Raynaud

The Symbolist Mêlée

(1890-1900)

Translated from the French
by
Claude AI (Anthropic)
in collaboration with
Marko Prekić Kentera

First English Translation

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(1890-1900)
by Ernest Raynaud

Translated from Ernest Raynaud's
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Translation 2025. by Claude AI (Anthropic)
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The Symbolist Mêlée

(1890-1900)

French writer and poet Ernest Raynaud (1864-1938)
by Frédéric-Auguste Cazals, 1892.

The Heroic Age of Symbolism

The year 1891 stands as Symbolism's annus mirabilis—its heroic phase. The School has launched so fierce a campaign against its enemies that it has swept aside every obstacle and cleared the field. In Paris, it commands its own organs: *La Plume*, *Mercure de France*, *La Revue Wagnérienne*, *La Cravache*. Even the provinces have joined the fray, with reviews like Chauvigné's *Revue de la littérature moderne* in Tours and Marius André's *Le Faune* in Avignon fighting the good fight. Abroad, too, the movement commands attention. M. Byvanck has brought out his findings with Perrin: *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891*. Limitless vistas beckon to its aspirations. The clamour it raises might well deceive. One could fancy that some vast revolution is brewing, that a new dispensation is struggling to be born. The very air reeks of gunpowder and rings with the rumour of battle, as on the eve of Hernani. Even the most obdurate opponents find discretion the better part of valour. Zola, who had thundered forth with characteristic ferocity to defend embattled naturalism, now comes to terms and consents to preside at one of *La Plume*'s banquets. François Coppée and Heredia will do likewise. It isn't simply that the Parnassians dread this youth whose violent manifestos breathe, as they say, the spirit of cannibals, and whom they credit with a readiness to throttle them—rather, they're yielding to pangs of conscience. The vindication of Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé stands alone in literary annals. These weren't unknown poets suddenly plucked from obscurity by fame. They were forgotten poets. Once, in years past, they had enjoyed their hour of renown, and the Parnassians who had consigned them to oblivion now stood arraigned before the bar of public opinion. They found themselves on the defensive, and however generously one might grant extenuating circumstances, such a miscarriage of literary justice could only damage their standing.

Jules Lemaître confessed he had gone too far in his essay on Verlaine when he spoke of the "stupefied dolts" of symbolism, whilst Brunetière took to discussing them in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* with all the ponderous solemnity of the lecture hall. True, eruptions of hostility still flare up here and there, but these spring from frayed nerves rather than principled opposition. At Heredia's salon, ever graced by elegant and distinguished company, M. Jules Huret arrives to gather material for his celebrated survey[1]. He finds himself set upon by a beautiful guest who bridles at his enterprise as though it were an act of homage to Symbolism. Wielding her fan like a weapon, she hounds him to the very door and into the anteroom, flinging after him in quivering fury: "Your symbolists... I loathe them!" How piquant an incident, given that Symbolism is already marching towards its triumphant installation in Heredia's own household—and doubly piquant if one might venture that this lovely and fleeting foe of the symbolists was none other than the future Madame Henri de Régnier, herself a writer of distinction who has claimed an enviable niche in letters under the name of Gérard d'Houville. Catulle Mendès heaves a bitter sigh: "Why bother arguing? Youth always wins!" And Symbolism does indeed have youth in its corner. It speaks for the generation that has come of age since 1870—a generation bred in defeat, restless and disillusioned, possessed of nerves strung taut as violin strings and a sensibility verging on the pathological. Symbolism thrives on the moral chaos spawned by corrupt officials, the Wilson scandal[tn1], and that parade of infamies which creates a desperate hunger for fresh

air. So many now pin their hopes on nothing less than wholesale demolition! It claims both the Boulangist rabble[tn2] and the anarchist bourgeoisie. Hence the curious alliance between aesthetes and anarchist comrades. They spell each other on the platform at public gatherings, expounding their programmes to audiences who grasp but one thing from this babel of speeches: that something must be torn down. Édouard Dubus delivers his lectures on the new aesthetic under Louise Michel's aegis. Through clouds of pipe smoke, the platform plays host in turn to Rachilde and Sébastien Faure, Paule Minck and Paul Adam, Séverine and Roinard, Ibels and Comrade Martinet. They thunder in unison against Academy and Capital, against Sarcey and Constans[2]. They denounce the Fourmies massacre[tn3] and the banning of *Lohengrin* from the Opera[tn4], and the crowd disperses to alternating battle cries of "Long live free verse!" and "Long live anarchy!" This political adventure hardly damages Symbolism in popular estimation, but the movement fortunately possesses weightier claims on educated attention. The new poets aren't all wreckers—if the sacred battalion harbours its share of clowns and mountebanks, it also boasts apostles and evangelists of a noble creed. Here are those who've had their fill of official materialism and the degraded literature that flies its flag. Here are the knights of the ideal for whom reality has become nausea. Here are those who refuse to make Science their god. Here are souls tormented by the riddle of human destiny; those who spurn cheap triumphs, vulgar gratifications and marketable glory to attempt the scaling of forbidden heights, seeking only in their ascent to remove themselves

From the uproar that spectres raise between their kind.

—for Symbolism's defining trait was nothing if not multiplicity and variety. And everywhere an unprecedented ferment of fresh sap surges and struggles towards a thousand different blossoms. Yes, in this Paris of 1891 beneath hostile skies, this Paris ravaged by tempests where May brings frost and June's drought compels the authorities to substitute Seine water for the proper supply in several arrondissements; in this Paris where atmospheric upheavals seem to mirror the fever in men's minds; in this rudderless Paris, wracked by political convulsions, its streets blocked by police and choked with riotous demonstrations both demagogic and jingoistic[tn5], with endless processions of strikers (café waiters, omnibus drivers, railway workers); in this Paris whose year opened with Michel Eyraud's execution[tn6] and where nightly the news vendors shriek of shocking murders (Cholet and little Neut; the Bernicat, Souffrain, Doré and Berlant affairs; Pezon, Sorré, de Moor, Balmadier, Anastay), disasters (the ghastly train wrecks at La Chapelle and Saint-Mandé), notable deaths (Admiral Aube, Millet, Henri Chapu, Léo Delibes, Meissonier, Théodore de Banville, Prince Jérôme Napoleon, Field Marshal von Moltke, J.-J. Weiss, Henri Littolff, Jules Grévy, General Boulanger, Alphand)—in this maelstrom the Muses hold court, and a fever of the brain spreads like contagion, drawing fresh virulence from each new shock to the collective nerves.

La Revue Blanche, destined to become a vital conduit for revolutionary ideas, makes its debut.

La Plume absorbs lock, stock and barrel the editorial team of the defunct *Art et critique* and, having emerged from the inevitable primordial confusion, establishes its departments with their roster of luminaries, thus:

Literary Criticism — Anatole France, Maurice Barrès, Charles Morice, Georges Lecomte, Camille Mauclair.

Dramatic Criticism — Jean Jullien, Marcel Baillot, Georges Roussel.

Art Criticism — Jules Antoine, Charles Saunier.

To which it appends: "Need we add that Léon Bloy and Léon Cladel remain our stalwart contributors, that Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jean Moréas, Stuart-Merrill, Jean Richepin, Maurice Bouchor, Ernest Raynaud, René Ghil and Gabriel Vicaire will neglect nothing in their power to enchant sensitive souls; that Lucien Descaves, Georges Darien, Louis Dumur, Oscar Méténier, J.-H. Rosny, Maurice Maeterlinck and Achille Delaroche are even now honing their pens and polishing their lenses? That all our young friends stand with us? Good—then that's settled. Now to the task!"

And to the task they set. In truth, they'd been hard at it for some time. The harvest was already ripening.

The year 1891 witnessed the literary debuts of Francis Jammes (six sonnets) and Pierre Louÿs (Astarté). This was the year when Théodore de Banville, casting his supreme farewell with *Les Occidentales* and *Rimes dorées*, took his leave, whilst Verlaine offered us *Bonheur*; Stéphane Mallarmé, *Pages*; Henri de Régnier, *Épisodes*, *Sites et Sonnets*; Jean Moréas, *Le Pèlerin passionné*; Maurice du Plessys, *La Dédicace à Apollodore*; Laurent Tailhade, *Vitraux* and *Le Pays du Muffle*; Rodenbach, *Le Règne du Silence*; Stuart-Merrill, *Les Fastes*; Gustave Kahn, *Chansons d'amant*; Emmanuel Signoret, *Le Livre de l'Amitié*; René Ghil, *Le Vœu de Vivre*; Louis Dumur, *Lassitudes*; Gabriel Vicaire, *À la Bonne Franquette*; Ajalbert, *Femmes et Paysages*; Ernest Raynaud, *Les Cornes du Faune*[3]; and were I to confine myself to poets alone, I should note that this was the year Maurice Barrès produced *Sous l'œil des barbares* and *Trois stations de psychothérapie*; Léon Bloy, *La Chevalière de la mort*; Huysmans, *Là-Bas*; Péladan, *L'Androgyne*; Rachilde, *La Sanglante ironie*; Albert Aurier, *Vieux*...

1891! The year Gabriel Mourey first published that much-coveted translation of Swinburne. The year *Les Chants de Maldoror* found new life in a fresh edition, alongside Corbière's *Les Amours jaunes*, and when Arthur Rimbaud's poems, until then scattered to the winds, were gathered under the title *Le Reliquaire*.

Yet books were not alone in seeking to forge new paths. The Plastic Arts and the Theatre were equally bent on innovation.

That same year, Antoine, still without a permanent home for his Théâtre Libre, mounted Hennique's *La mort du Duc d'Enghien* at the Porte Saint-Martin, and staged here and there Georges Ancey's *L'École des Veufs*, Lecomte's *La Meule*, Ibsen's *Le Canard sauvage*, and *Le Père Goriot*, whilst Paul Fort established the Théâtre d'Art and proclaimed that from March onwards "evening performances shall conclude with the staging of a tableau by painters of the young school. Actors and models shall form the motionless, silent figures. Musical accompaniment and perfumes specially blended to suit the tableau's subject shall perfect the impression." I transcribe the programme for 27 January:

I. Dans les Vignes, sketch by Ch. Maurrer. — II. Les Veilleuses, one act in prose by Paul Gabillard. — III. L'Après-midi d'un Faune, by Stéphane Mallarmé. — IV. La Fille aux mains coupées, mystery in two tableaux by Pierre Quillard, music by Sylvio Lazzari. — V. Madame la Mort, cerebral drama in three tableaux in prose by Rachilde. — VI. Prostituée, popular scene by M. de Chirac. A mixed bag, clearly. Meanwhile, the théâtre d'application[tn7] was presenting Edouard Dujardin's Antonia.

None of this stirred Renan from his lofty indifference. He pronounced: "The Decadents and Symbolists are infants sucking their thumbs." Though he did concede: "I have never read a word of

theirs"—which might have served as an excuse to the uninitiated, unaware that the philosopher surveyed all our ferment from his perch amongst the stars.

On 3 February 1891, the Hôtel des Sociétés Savantes hosted the banquet for *Le Pèlerin passionné*, a magnificent demonstration that drew two hundred artists and poets and sent ripples round the globe. This marked the high-water mark of Symbolism's golden age—indeed, its very apotheosis. Moréas then stood as one of the movement's standard-bearers, and in honouring him, they acclaimed Symbolism itself. Stéphane Mallarmé took the chair, flanked by Catulle Mendès, Anatole France, Octave Mirbeau, Clovis Hugues, Maurice Barrès, Henri Lavedan, Odilon Redon, Félicien Rops, Paul Gauguin, Édouard Schuré, Alidor Delzant, Henri de Régnier, Francis Vielé-Griffin, Jules Tellier, Chabrier, R. de Bonnières, Alfred Valette, Maurice du Plessys, Raymond de la Tailhède, Raynaud, Tausserat-Radel, and all who burned to carve out a reputation in letters and the arts.

The following morning, newspapers trumpeted this triumph in dithyrambic terms, devoting lead articles to commentary. Testimonials of admiration and fellow-feeling arrived from abroad. Public excitement ran so high that Anatole France, then guardian of critical opinion at *Le Temps*, found himself obliged to abandon the archaeological studies in which he had immured himself—to Lucien Descaves's profound despair—and enlighten his readership. He sketched medallion portraits of the new poets with such manifest sympathy that he succeeded in thoroughly infuriating the last unassailable fortress of Parnassianism, the brilliant but waspish and vindictive Leconte de Lisle, who forgot himself so far as to declare in public: "After Victor Hugo and Myself, I fail to see what remains to be done in verse." — "Poetry," came the chorus from the nettled Symbolists, and the public burst into applause.

Such a triumph could only be crowned by an eruption of snobbery. Jean Lorrain's avidly followed chronicles had converted to the new creed the denizens of the boulevards, the stage door, and the grand hotels. L'Almanach de Paris Parisien, that arbiter of elegance, would soon decree that the ultimate cachet for a hostess lay in knowing a Symbolist poet and displaying him to her guests. The society columns never failed to report on Verlaine's and Mallarmé's receptions. These poets held court. Mallarmé, one could understand. For years his Tuesdays had drawn a devoted coterie to his modest quarters in the rue de Rome. Mallarmé, that poet-functionary, respectable paterfamilias of clockwork habits, fitted hand in glove with bourgeois propriety. His wife and daughter graciously presided over the tea things. But Verlaine!... the tempestuous, wandering Verlaine!... the lone wolf Verlaine!... One struggled to picture him bowing to social niceties, proffering the plate of petits fours[tn8] with a gracious smile, hemmed in by prattle and furbelows. Yet submit he did. Not with any enthusiasm, though he was briefly tickled by the notion of having cards engraved after the fashion of M. de Choufleury: "Monsieur Paul Verlaine will be at home on..."; but the bombardment was relentless! Callers hammered at his door at every hour. He simply had to stem this ceaseless tide of interruption. The sole means of recovering his liberty lay in sacrificing one evening to his notoriety.

The practice had begun around 1887 at the hotel in the rue Royer-Collard, a boarding-house affair "patronised by Moldo-Wallachians."

"Though fortune had already turned her back on me, I held my Wednesdays," Verlaine records in his memoirs. "And on those evenings, my cramped quarters, bearing no resemblance whatsoever to Socrates's dwelling, sometimes harboured as many as forty souls of both sexes."

The tradition continued in the rue Saint-Jacques. "A fearsome staircase: banisters and supports of rough-hewn timber, slathered in blood-red paint. A mezzanine floor, lofty as any second storey, owing more to the jaggedness than the number of treads. Scant gaslight to illuminate the precipitous stairs and banisters too broad for a frame 'somewhat given to excess,' though the landlord, 'good egg that he was,' would 'station a candle on an inner window-ledge come reception nights.' Visitors courted disagreeable encounters. In the murk, one collided with dubious couples, ladies of negotiable virtue and gentlemen 'too pretty to be earning an honest living,' sporting lustrous kiss-curls beneath their cloth caps—when it wasn't some sot negotiating the ascent with difficulty. One might equally find oneself dodging a marital spat that had spilled out onto the landing through an open door, and risk being caught in the crossfire.

But it was in the rue de Vaugirard, in comfortable lodgings near the Odéon where Maurice Barrès's good offices had secured his installation, that Verlaine's Wednesdays truly came into their own. "Friends in ever-swelling numbers, accompanied by mere acquaintances, the indifferent, even the merely curious, crammed into my drawing-rooms... which comprised, truth be told, one perfectly respectable but solitary square chamber. Little verse was declaimed, the paterfamilias—your servant—generally raising objections to such entertainment, but laughter abounded and good fellowship prevailed. Beer rather than tea when funds permitted. In leaner times, sugared water laced with rum, occasionally furnished by subscription amongst the company. Tobacco and good cheer invariably held in common."

Proceedings generally passed off splendidly, though Verlaine had his humours and might suddenly turn on his guests. One evening saw him leap up without warning, erupt in profanities, seize cane and hat, and make for the exit. The assembly chose to take no offence. They knew his destination. The entire company trooped after him to the François I, his establishment of choice. Once back in familiar surroundings, the Master had recovered his bonhomie and sparkle. The evening ended delightfully.

Whilst Verlaine lacked an attentive spouse to receive visitors, any willing female would supply the deficiency. The distaff side shone with particular brilliance. There was the exquisite Sophie Harlay, and Rachilde, already renowned for her genius and the myths surrounding her, concealing a golden heart and delicate sensibility beneath her slashing, swashbuckling exterior. Novices, whom she overawed, observed her from a safe distance as some formidable enchantress—but what pyrotechnics of wit, what diabolical brio when she crossed verbal rapiers with Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and his coruscating paradoxes, or with Laurent Tailhade and his murderous ripostes! Verlaine, no mean hand with a pencil, has bequeathed us a sketch of one such gathering: Cazals upright in 1830s garb, holding forth to the assembled company. One can identify Sophie Harlay, Rachilde, Gabriel Vicaire, Henri d'Argis, Jean Moréas, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Tailhade, Jules Tellier, Paterne Berrichon, Ary Renan, Lefèvre, Fernand Clerget, Alain Desveaux... The drawing captivates because it preserves the chaos of liqueur glasses strewn across the table, the seediness of the hotel chamber with its shabby furnishings, illuminated solely by two candlesticks, and its fog of tobacco smoke.

Yet however beguiling these soirées at the home of a Verlaine basking in vogue and elevated to clamorous celebrity, their pandemonium and hurly-burly could never eclipse, for me, those tranquil evenings of yesteryear spent with a neglected, unsung Verlaine who would graciously receive, at a moment's notice, round his invalid's couch, a handful of chosen intimates.

An Evening at Paul Verlaine's

Back in 1885, Paul Verlaine was living with his mother in a squalid furnished lodging-house in the rue Moreau, deep in the working-class quarter on the fringes of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. The street opened beneath the arches of the Vincennes railway—that grim expanse of brickwork whose sinister shadow unfurled endlessly across the district. The hotel[tn9] festered at the back of a dank courtyard where passing trains belched forth hurricanes of soot, cinders and smoke. The yard lay cluttered with cast-off clothing, scrap metal, and a barricade of handcarts where neighbourhood children ran wild, to the torment of every ear within range. From dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, this wretched dead-end rang with ceaseless footfall, a tempest of noise and outcry, singing, shouting, barking, laughter and quarrels—all the hullabaloo and uproar of a workers' quarter in its pitiful human ferment.

Madame Verlaine mother lodged on the first floor. Verlaine, whose bad leg forbade him the stairs, occupied a ground-floor room. This chamber drew its air and light solely through a barred window giving onto the courtyard, and commanded no vista save the nightmare of tall, naked walls, sightless and daubed in ochre and brown. The corner bed sported threadbare calico curtains, black scattered with red flowers. Everything else matched: faded wallpaper, chipped tiles, a walnut chest bearing the remnants of a washbasin; one rickety, stained table and four decrepit chairs completed the furnishings. The walls displayed prints and lithographs: a portrait of the poet as a child; another of his mother in flounced skirts, in the full bloom of her thirties; a Christ painted by Germain Nouveau after the original in Saint-Géry church at Arras; and in the alcove, an old picture salvaged from former affluence—a Greuze[tn10] maiden pressing a turtle-dove to her naked breast. Yet neither these embellishments nor the potted flowers at the window could disguise the lodging's destitution.

Verlaine, confined to bed, read voraciously—but borrowed books only, his library having been scattered to misfortune's four winds. His entire personal holdings consisted of a few recent volumes of verse, presents from their authors, which a small ink-blackened wooden shelf amply contained. From his old library, Verlaine had preserved only an original edition of Corbière's *Amours jaunes*, Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer*, and Calderón's works. He was besotted with this poet—the mere mention of whose name would launch him into raptures.

Verlaine's mother was a septuagenarian still robust, unpretentious and warm-hearted, though age and setbacks had somewhat addled her wits. Her portrait at thirty proved she'd been a beauty, worthy of Germain Nouveau's apostrophe:

> *Femme de militaire et mère de poète.*
> *Il vous restait un bruit de bataille et de vers.*
> *Quelque chose de noble et de fier dans la tête.*
>
> [Soldier's wife and poet's mother,
> There lingered in you an echo of battles and verses,

Something noble and proud about the head.]

She doted on her son and kept careful watch over his associations. Verlaine had warned me before my first visit: "She's wary of strangers. I'll introduce you as a ministry clerk. Not a word about literature in her presence!" So it was arranged. The ruse succeeded. My title of ministry clerk won me instant favour with Madame Verlaine mother, and by way of initiation, the dear woman promptly bade me close my eyes and open my mouth, whereupon she slipped in a handful of rock candy with impish delight. Age had given her this fancy. It was her way of welcoming visitors she approved of.

Their circumstances were hardly enviable. They'd just arrived from Juniville, an Ardennes village where the remnants of their fortune had vanished in an ill-fated farming venture. The mother had managed to rescue from the wreckage a bundle of bonds, which she kept hidden from her son. The income scarcely reached 900 francs. On this they had to survive. Verlaine had resolved to live by his pen. Though the newspapers were beginning to take notice of him, his author's rights brought in nothing. Worse, he'd just plunged rather deeply into debt by publishing *Jadis et Naguère* at his own expense. They were destitute. They bore it bravely, but what temptation to drink for Verlaine under such a crushing load of worries! Mercifully, his mother stood guard, barricading her door against spirits and unwholesome influences.

This proved, despite illness and hardship, a fruitful period in the poet's life. He laboured feverishly, writing *Amour*, *Parallèlement*, and *Mémoires d'un veuf*. Friends came to visit, gathering round his bedside. One might encounter Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Stéphane Mallarmé, Edmond Lepelletier. The younger generation was finding its way to his retreat. I brought Francis Vielé-Griffin, whom I'd collected from his smart studio in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs and who, unaccustomed to such spectacles of penury, was painfully affected. "We must get Verlaine out of here," he confided as we left. My thoughts exactly—but where to find the necessary means? Maurice Barrès would soon lend a hand.

I brought Adrien Remacle, Édouard Dubus, and others besides. All were charmed by Verlaine's open manner, his good humour, and a buoyancy that, given the circumstances and such dismal surroundings, truly deserved the name of heroism. I never once heard Verlaine complain or play for sympathy. He might rail against his lot, but only in brief outbursts, quickly checked. In his company one spent golden hours in an atmosphere heated by enthusiasm, faith, and elevated discourse. A delightful talker, he never held forth. He didn't pursue refinements like Stéphane Mallarmé. He conversed freely, in the Socratic vein. No venom, no backbiting. Sound, steady judgement. With his familiars he affected the Ardennes patois, rich and flavoursome. His talk sparkled with racy expressions culled from rural or suburban slang, yet never strayed beyond the bounds of propriety. How I loved my visits to him!

One encounter in particular remains etched in memory. It was evening. Verlaine, propped in bed, was reading to me by lamplight—the lamp set on the bedside table—passages from a recently received book of poems that had made a strong impression: René Ghil's *Légendes d'âmes et de sangs*. Just as he was introducing me to this work's innovations, the author himself appeared, responding to a cordial invitation.

René Ghil was then twenty-three. He radiated vigour and inspired immediate sympathy. His clipped speech, economical gestures, olive complexion, and thick black hair brushed upright gave no immediate hint of his Flemish ancestry. Only in his verses, feverish and highly coloured, did the blonde

and rosy sensuality of Flanders declare itself, "long mingled with ardent Castilles". Ghil's poems took their subjects from news items. They were realistic tableaux transfigured by lyrical feeling and expression. The author proclaimed himself a disciple of Balzac and Zola. He claimed to have turned from fashionable poets because he couldn't detect in them "the smell of the wind that passes". This confession, which many newcomers might have echoed, bears remembering. It highlights the mediocrity of Parnassian art and shows how all the aesthetic vitality of the moment, all innovation, all poetry had sought refuge in prose.

Following his masters, René Ghil drew inspiration from the crowd, haunting streets, markets, churches, railway stations, pausing pensively to watch a wedding or funeral cortège pass. For him, each poem must be a novel, "the novel of an hour, a minute, a psychological and physiological moment, complete with milieu, the frame of the Fact, a Fact that signifies something". In capturing that hour, minute, or moment, he strove to "convey the impression of milieu upon body, of body upon soul, for he couldn't conceive the body without its milieu, the soul without its body—that is, the idea without the sensation". As for language, he dreamed of "the word that impresses rather than the word that merely narrates". He'd forged a distinctive style bound to alienate the common reader—a language addressing every sense, bristling with onomatopoeia and typographical tricks, where adverbs sporting unexpected capitals would career wildly through sentences, where parenthetical asides recurred with the insistence of a leitmotif; a musical, orchestrated language.

Among the collection's finest achievements was *La Terre qu'on laisse* [The Land One Leaves], evoking a country lad bound for the city who, deaf to his native soil's entreaties, marched resolutely station-ward with military stride. "Off he goes," the poet sighed, "off he goes…"

Tandis que, lueur vague au noir des peupliers,
Très morne a lui la gare et, qu'au loin, singuliers.
Vont des appels pressés de quelque Télégramme,
Triangle soûl qui sonne au noir des impliés.

Derrière, à l'horizon dérougi qui s'aveugle.
Mi-levée et, Travail! sa grossesse de grains,
Plissée à pleine peau par les sillons sanguins,
La Terre désaimée, ainsi qu'un Taureau meugle.
Immense de douleur se hausse sur les reins!…

Il s'en va. Le noir vit et dans le gaulis erre.
Si rempli de douleurs que nul ne le rêva,
Un inouï soupir; et d'une voix qu'on n'a
Que lorsqu'on va mourir, quelqu'un se désespère:
Un de plus, un de plus, un de plus qui s'en va!.,.»

[Whilst, vague gleam in the poplars' black,
Most mournful to him the station, and afar, strange,
Press urgent calls of some Telegram,

Drunken triangle ringing in the implicated dark.

Behind, on the reddening horizon going blind,
Half-risen and, Work! her pregnancy of grain,
Creased to the full skin by the blood-red furrows,
The Earth unloved, like a Bull bellows,
Immense with pain rearing on her loins!…

Off he goes. The dark lives and wanders in the copse.
So filled with sorrows none ever dreamed,
An unheard-of sigh; and with a voice one has
Only when about to die, someone despairs:
"One more, one more, one more going away!…"]

You had to hear René Ghil declaim this poem, his voice strangled with passion, to grasp the full emotive force that words could wield.

Tomorrow, René Ghil would repudiate this volume. He already foreshadowed his evolution in the preface, where he sketched out an ambitious philosophical system, envisioning humanity portrayed in vast frescoes from primordial times to the future. He would soon embark on a vertiginous epic, *L'Évolution de l'être humain*, a Herculean labour to which he's devoted himself ever since, with lengthy fragments appearing in volumes at irregular intervals. Yet I wonder whether, in his determination to trespass on music's domain, René Ghil hasn't lost his way. Still, with talent so robust, a voice so genuine, one must be circumspect in one's reservations. What remains beyond dispute is that the author of Traité du verbe knows the resources of vocabulary better than anyone, that his integrity is unimpeachable, and that if he sometimes stumbles in harness, it's through neither incompetence nor weakness. René Ghil endures as one of the Symbolist movement's most intriguing figures. His dogged perseverance and fearless disinterestedness command respect at the very least...

We were still reeling from the nervous jolt, the inner tremor that fine poetry induces, when the door opened tentatively, silhouetting against the shadows a feverish, uneasy figure. A man of middling height with a long fringe of black beard, wearing blue serge, who hesitated on seeing us and made to retreat, whispering inaudibly to an unseen companion. He was soon propelled forward by a small, clean-shaven dynamo who burst in behind him crying: "No, no, I won't leave. I came to see Verlaine. I must see him!" Continuing to hustle his predecessor, he crossed the threshold in turn, slammed the door to prevent escape, rushed to Verlaine's bed, pumped his hands effusively, and with the triumph of a conqueror planting his standard on a hard-won citadel, flung his name aloft: "Louis Le Cardonnel!" He explained breathlessly: "Can you credit it? For weeks I've been badgering Nouveau to bring me here, and now Nouveau wants to bolt because he finds people here and crowds terrify him—but anyone one meets at Verlaine's must be a friend!" Wheeling towards us: "I'm certain these gentlemen are poets!" Verlaine performed introductions. "There, you see!" crowed Le Cardonnel, fixing Nouveau with his gaze. "No strangers here. We're all family. Let's talk!"

This swashbuckling entrance raised smiles all round. A current of sympathy flowed. I knew Le Cardonnel by reputation—his verses in *Le Chat Noir* had attracted considerable notice. I knew his

escort better still, having read poems of his in Charles Cros's *Revue du Monde Nouveau*. This poet, an old comrade of Verlaine and Rimbaud, enjoyed celebrity in literary circles. I'd heard confidences about him from Verlaine himself and Ernest Delahaye. I knew he suffered from acute neurasthenia. His constrained demeanour distressed more than surprised me. He crumpled onto a chair and remained frozen in truculent silence. But Le Cardonnel was oblivious. He exulted in his wish fulfilled at last. Verlaine, meeting him for the first time, was eager to hear his verses. Le Cardonnel needed no urging and treated us to several poems already displaying his mastery. Among them, this piece of startling freshness and intensity, its language fluid, edgeless, with contours as vague as dream-mist:

VILLE MORTE

Lentement, sourdement, des vêpres sonnent
Dans la grand 'paix de cette vague ville;
Des arbres gris sur la place frissonnent.
Comme inquiets de ces vêpres qui sonnent.
Inquiétante est cette heure tranquille.

Un idiot qui va, revient et glousse.
Content, car les enfants sont à l'école;
A sa fenêtre une vieille qui tousse.
Elle fait des gestes, à moitié folle,
A l'idiot qui va, revient et glousse.

Murs décrépits, lumière décrépite
Que ce novembre épand sur cette place:
Sur un balcon, du linge froid palpite.
Pâle, dans la lumière décrépite.
Et puis le son des cloches qui se lasse…

Tout à coup, plus de cloches, plus de vieille.
Plus de pauvre idiot, vaguement singe.
Et l'on dirait que la ville sommeille.
Plus d'idiot, de cloches, ni de vieille:..
Seul, maintenant, le blanc glacé du linge.

DEAD CITY

[Slowly, dully, vespers sound
In the great peace of this vague town;
Grey trees upon the square are trembling,
As if made anxious by these vespers sounding,
Disquieting this tranquil hour.

An idiot who goes, returns and clucks,
Content, for children are at school;
At her window an old woman coughing,
Making gestures, half a fool,
At the idiot who goes, returns and clucks.

Walls decrepit, light decrepit
That November sheds upon this square:
On a balcony, cold linen flutters,
Pallid in the light decrepit,
And then the sound of bells grows weary…

Sudden—no more bells, no more old woman,
No more wretched idiot, vaguely ape,
And you'd say the city slumbers.
No idiot, no bells, no old woman:
Alone remains the linen's glacial shape.]

Grogs arrived. Their steam and the ambient charm eventually coaxed Nouveau from his shell. Yielding to Verlaine's persistent entreaties, he agreed to recite. He was then composing Valentines, a suite of gallant pieces, madrigals in the eighteenth-century manner but executed with ravishing freedom and delicacy of touch. What a loss to French letters that this poet's work should be largely destroyed! Nouveau would soon collapse into mystical delirium. He'd fancy himself Saint Labre, abase himself to expiate his sins by begging on country roads, in villages, beneath church porches. He'd burn his manuscripts[4], be seized by a mania to shed his identity, erase himself from the living, obliterate even his name's memory. But let's not dwell on the sombre future. Let's surrender to the present's intoxication. The hour proffers a chalice of honey. Let's savour it like philosophers who understand the worth of things and their fragility.

The modest festivities were at their height when a final visitor materialised. This was Forain—not the caustic, disillusioned Forain later revealed, but a youthful Forain, bright, brisk, debonair, seemingly delighted with existence. You'd have thought some benevolent spirit had summoned him from the lofty Faubourg Saint-Honoré, where he resided, to crown our revelry. This sharp-witted native of Reims regaled us with his quicksilver humour, his coruscating talk peppered with witticisms, paradoxes and barbed observations. He recounted his delights as artist and observer, his adventures as boulevardier[tn11] and night prowler. Paris enthralled him. "What a miraculous city!" he exclaimed. "So suggestive, teeming with mysteries and astounding spectacles! I often find myself, at ungodly hours, surveying it from my balcony. Not a soul in the streets, which resemble corridors in burial vaults. Everywhere a vast, hushed, illuminated expanse. Ranks of street lamps blaze away along deserted avenues, encircling the Arc de Triomphe like a colossal black catafalque. The city might then declare, with Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*:

Oui! c'est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleuris, déserte.

[Yes! it is for me, for me, that I bloom, deserted.]

These strings of fire seem arranged for some phantom gala. You expect to see burst forth a stupendous cavalcade, a glittering dream procession. Sometimes the fevered imagination, as in Zedlitz's ballad, fancies it beholds beneath invisible, billowing standards a riotous parade of spectres."

Forain was then executing a ceiling commissioned by some Highness or other. I'd seen the sketch in his studio—a nude Diana suspended in space, all fluidity and vapour in the Fantin-Latour mode. Ah, Forain's studio! A bathtub held centre stage, and entering eyes were dazzled by a triple rank of patent boots, flawlessly aligned like troops on parade. Here was that passion for precision and correctness that had so vexed Alexandre Dumas père in his son, prompting him to declare: "You're too orderly—you'll never be anything but a bourgeois!" Proof that the finest minds can err. The great novelist had proved a false prophet. Forain's example furnished a second refutation. The artist cultivated dandyish airs. He rode daily in the Bois. Gone were the days when he'd shared Rimbaud's vagrant misery, when each nightfall meant hunting for shelter. Forain now lived in splendour. His anecdotes initiated us into the glories of high society, threw open exclusive haunts—the Opera's wings, Madame Caron's box "with her regal bearing"[tn12], the ballet foyer, the Armenonville pavilion[tn13]—conjured up Parisian revelry: sensational premieres, private views, race meetings, dinners, balls, cotillions[tn14]. His discourse glittered with gold leaf and brilliant flashes, the rattle of carriages and costly things. He summoned into Verlaine's mean quarters radiant visions of society women, equestriennes, ballerinas in gauze tutus mingling with men in evening dress. A festive hum seemed to accompany him, as if gypsy violins played in his wake. Certain of his remarks exploded like champagne corks. He produced Levantine cigarettes from an exquisite case, gift of the Duke of M... and bearing his arms, then proposed whisking us all off to supper at some boulevard establishment. What became of this plan for my companions I cannot say, but I found myself regretfully obliged to decline, given the late hour—my work demanded I rise at dawn, and my sole concern was catching the last omnibus home to my distant quarters.

Thus Verlaine's lodgings, however bereft of comfort, provided the setting for refined discourse. But his mother's death some months later threw everything into disarray. Verlaine, stripped of her protective presence, fell prey once more to his demons. His leg had improved. He could rise, shuffle along supporting himself against walls. His room lay just across a corridor from the taproom. He succumbed to the temptation of lingering there. The packet of bonds discovered in his mother's room had been handed to him—a windfall of several thousand francs. His enjoyment proved brief. Days after the funeral, Verlaine received a bailiff dispatched by his wife, to whom he'd failed to pay his divorce settlement arrears. Accounts must be settled. The poet might have pleaded poverty—the squalor of his surroundings argued eloquently enough. But he was an honourable man. Without a moment's hesitation, he extracted the precious papers from his mattress and surrendered them with a simple gesture to the bailiff, who pocketed them (less than was owed) and departed, whilst the landlord, witnessing this scene, stood thunderstruck. Appalled to see his tenant's solvency evaporate, he exploded in fury, going so far as to brand him a "fool" and declaring him henceforth unworthy of credit. By good fortune, Verlaine retained some pocket money. Reconciliation was promptly sealed with a round of drinks, enthusiastically accepted.

Winter had set in. Verlaine had every reason to linger in the warm, bright taproom. There he could economise on fuel and candles. There he worked. There he entertained friends. You might find him drinking with navvies—but let's not be too scandalised. He maintained his dignity. The

establishment's rougher elements addressed him only with respect. Even to the local streetwalkers, he remained "Monsieur Paul".

What a peculiar world poverty had backed him into! The hotel let rooms by the hour. The landlady would sit knitting among her children, monitoring from her post the evening traffic of couples whose shadows flitted across the corridor's spyhole. At times the eldest, a boy of twelve or so, would slip away at his mother's signal to proffer a candlestick or towel—a ritual so routine that nobody noticed unless rows erupted through drink or haggling. Verlaine's friends braved these awkward proximities for love of him and made the best of things. Aesthetic debates proceeded before the bar under the noses of the dive's habitués. To their credit, they never forgot themselves in front of company. When verses were recited, they fell silent. Whether they derived pleasure I cannot say, but they listened reverently and displayed far more respect for the Muses than one sees from certain society folk in drawing rooms. I never detected in them those knowing smirks, those masks of crushing boredom or insolent indifference one catches on well-bred faces. I thought of Verlaine's labourers on the night they unveiled his monument, at that banquet where three hundred intellectuals created an unholy din, hurled plates at the readers and refused even to listen to his poetry—and the comparison hardly flattered the literati.

I recall the joy of a young mason, fresh from military service, whom Verlaine had permitted to copy passages from *Sagesse*. He transcribed them painstakingly, with something approaching religious devotion, in his old barrack-room notebook where he'd collected regimental songs. He took pride in this privilege as in a medal of honour or letters patent of nobility. Ah, good Saint Verlaine, how right you were to seek the company of the humble and simple! Those whom life had treated harshly proved indulgent towards your failings and felt for you. They didn't slap you with contempt whilst preening over their own virtue like those self-satisfied bourgeois who parade their respectable facades, those Pharisees whose selfishness and hypocrisy moved Thomas De Quincey to observe: "Everyone who has excited my disgust in this world was rich and flourishing."

The Symbolist Generation

The main cohort of poets who, under the tutelage of Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, erected the symbolist temple, came into the world around 1864[5]. They could hardly have chosen a worse moment—right in the throes of a crisis of disillusionment. France had just experienced a period of unparalleled prosperity and had fancied herself launched upon the definitive conquest of happiness. She had dozed off in this certainty, heedless of fortune's games, only to awaken to sinister creaking sounds. The Empire, to which she had entrusted her destiny, was tottering. It carried lead in its wing: the lead of the 1863 elections. Napoleon III, that illuminated soul convinced of his divine mission, no longer believed in his star. He couldn't see how to extricate himself from that wretched Mexican affair, so recklessly undertaken and which he dragged behind him like a ball and chain. He knew the prestige of his armies hung in the balance. He felt increasingly isolated. The Roman question had alienated the Catholic party; the London agreement, the world of commerce and industry. The opposition, hitherto timid and scattered, drew strength and cohesion from this. Faced with mounting evidence of general discontent and this hostile uprising en masse, the emperor panicked and let himself be forced into conceding the right of coalition. It was in 1864 that this agent of dissolution entered our body politic. Whilst imperial authority signed the death warrant of the capitalist bourgeoisie and crumbled, Bismarck's industriousness was constructing the formidable might of Germany, whose Unity he forged. It was in 1864 that the Treaty of Vienna consecrated his dominance, soon followed by the victory at Sadowa (1866), the first thunderclap of the storm gathering at our borders, which clear-sighted minds took as legitimate cause for alarm. To be sure, at home the festivities hadn't ceased. Reviews, military parades, visits from sovereigns, Haussmann's grand openings—all provided daily pretexts for celebrations and fireworks. The streets remained full of flags and orchestras, but this borrowed gaiety lacked the conviction of earlier days. People still made merry. They no longer appeared, as Verlaine would say, to believe in their happiness.

France resembled the heroine of that fashionable drama, *La Dame aux camélias*. In the midst of the ball, she swoons, seized by a sudden stab to the heart. Someone once said of these fleeting cardiac syncopes that they're telegrams from Destiny delivered to the wrong address. How apt. France had believed herself cured of her long past convulsions. In the intoxication of pleasure, she had forgotten her malady. She turned pale to see the spectre of bygone days rise again.

France was rich, but everything has its price, as Talleyrand said—wealth no less than the rest. Luxury enervates. Idleness corrodes, and the springs weren't particularly robust to begin with! Not without consequence had they endured so many shocks. Consider what France had suffered, blow upon blow, in less than a century: internal revolutions, foreign wars, invasions. Each generation had seen its youth and finest specimens mown down in their prime. What easy prey this milieu of "survivors" made for the ravages of anaemia and tuberculosis! France was rich in money but poor in blood. France was becoming depopulated. So many things deterred people from marriage: the taste for pleasure, business worries, fear of responsibilities, even noble scruples. Sully-Prudhomme, then of an age to be a father, condemned himself to celibacy because he didn't recognise his right to dispose of

another's existence and would have considered it criminal to condemn an innocent creature to the hell of living. Marriages now scarcely obeyed anything but mercenary considerations. They were made, to use Stendhal's phrase, through the collusion of notaries. The contracting parties observed each other with hostile mistrust. Sympathy played no part, still less love. Social conventions decided everything. Who spoke of founding a hearth, a family? Who thought of children? Only the poor welcomed them. And even they welcomed them as household fixtures, sources of profit, hopes of gain, new cards in fortune's game. The rich saw in them the fragmentation of estates, the division of inheritances, a source of tiresome complications, and rejected them through avarice or calculation. Well-to-do couples dreaded them as an accident. Not all could say, as in Émile Augier's *Gabrielle*:

Et si les choses vont de la même façon
Nous pourrons nous payer le luxe d'un garçon.

[And if things continue going this way
We'll be able to afford the luxury of a son.]

They knew the dear price of children. One alone meant straitened circumstances. In numbers, ruin. And the diffusion of comfort brought its own drawbacks. There were the coquettes who wouldn't countenance a ruined figure. Those who in their dreams might have smiled at motherhood yielded when, examining their pale chlorotic complexion in the mirror, they calculated the risks would be too great.

A poet of this generation—inexpert in craft but sincere in inspiration, M. Arthur Simand—captures these apprehensions when, showing us his mother in her ball gown, alarmed in full happiness by an unmistakable sign of pregnancy, he confesses bitterly:

Et c'est moi, fruit rongeur, qui la vins assombrir.

[And I was the gnawing fruit that came to darken her joy.]

The child made his entrance as an interloper in the bourgeois households of 1864. Few were those whose birth was greeted with a cry of joy, and hence most dragged through their wretched existence the curse of those *cui non risere parentes*—those upon whom their parents did not smile—and fed upon melancholy. O the crimes of economic circumstance! Once born, the child became a source of trouble and worry. Away with the nuisance! A mercenary wet nurse took charge, spiriting him off to some godforsaken village—fortunate if they watched him depart without quietly invoking the chance he might never return. I exaggerate nothing. A new malady had appeared: Neurosis. Never were mothers more irritable, more vexed, more inclined to torment those around them. Madame Lepic was no exception. Never had fathers so disarmed themselves before their wives' demands, so prey were they to overwork and neurasthenia. Poor children, condemned to isolation and martyrdom! "Not everyone can be an orphan," Jules Renard sighs wistfully. Their lament rises and swells. A poet of the following generation, Fernand Divoire, would soon collect it, addressing parents thus:

Notre rancune est devant vous dressée.
Pères, hommes de sport, stupides et dandys,
Mères, faites de rien, de chiffons, d'organdis,
De balivernes amassées.
Car nous nous souvenons que nous avons grandi
Dans le fumier de vos pensées.

[Our rancour stands raised before you.
Fathers, sporting men, stupid dandies,
Mothers, made of nothing, of rags and organdie,
Of accumulated twaddle.
For we remember that we grew
In the dung-heap of your thoughts.]

One must indeed approve, when one considers the childhood distress of a Sully-Prudhomme, when one reflects upon the domestic hell of a Gérard de Nerval, a Baudelaire, a Glatigny, a Corbière, a Rimbaud, a Jules Laforgue... Who among us hasn't sympathised with the resigned sorrow of Poil de Carotte? Haven't we seen the wealthy parents of Édouard Dubus lose interest in him to the point of letting him founder in utter destitution? And anyone who has read Rachilde's latest book, *Dans le Puits*, can see clearly that she too has little to boast of regarding excessive tenderness from those who gave her life. But why select? Why cite this one or that, when at the core of all sincere and original contemporary writings breathes the gall of a darkened dawn? Let each of us examine ourselves or recall the confidences received in our youth.

Nor must we forget that a tragic event weighed upon the generation of symbolist poets, contributing considerably to their disorientation and vulnerability: the disaster of 1870. For some, it meant exile, the scramble of precipitous departures, the distress of makeshift arrangements, anxiety about tomorrow. For others, the agonies of the siege, the Commune uprising, life confined to cellars amidst explosions and reflected fires, privations of every sort, famine. And upon all, by repercussion, worked the fraying nerves and panic of the hour. The youngest suckled defeat with their mother's milk. Those yet unborn perceived it in the convulsions of their embryonic existence. The shock would long reverberate through mothers' wombs, marking their future offspring with an indelible and sickly trace[6]. Scarcely recovered from these terrors, the child was exposed to the torture of boarding school. Here he was, prisoner of a lycée, condemned to solitude of soul, huddled shivering into himself, withering in the shadows of dormitories and courtyards like a plant deprived of air and sunlight. The weak were destined to serve as whipping boys. They were exploited. They were bullied:

Les forts les appellent des filles
Et les malins des innocents.
Ils sont doux; ils donnent leurs billes.
Ils ne seront pas commerçants.

[The strong call them girls
And the clever ones, innocents.

They are gentle; they give away their marbles.
They'll never be businessmen.]

Ils frissonnent sous l'œil du maître,
Son ombre les rend malheureux.
Ces enfants n'auraient pas dû naître.
L'enfance est trop dure pour eux!

[They tremble beneath the master's eye,
His shadow makes them wretched.
These children should never have been born.
Childhood is too harsh for them!]

There had always been negligent or severe parents, unnatural mothers. Our history is sufficiently furnished with troubles and seditions that families always had critical hours to weather. The barbarous custom of boarding school is an ancient institution. But whilst these were trials common to youth of all ages, one must acknowledge that never before had childhood possessed such impressionable souls or shown itself so grievously affected. Never had a rejected child uttered the pathetic accents of a Baudelaire. Never had a schoolboy subjected to the boarding school prison rendered the heart-rending plaint of a Sully-Prudhomme. It's also true that never had boarding school shown itself so stripped of tenderness and solicitude. Never had the rupture of social frameworks made contacts between schoolmates of such mixed conditions so harsh, multiplying to such an extent the causes of friction for delicate sensibilities. And never had the monstrous agglomeration of cities, devouring space and gardens, drowning light in their growing smoke, killing the azure and dreams, so darkened young minds with fog and filled eyes with sinister visions. And never had schoolboys displayed such precocious scruples or such morbid susceptibilities:

O la leçon qui n'est pas sue,
Le devoir qui n'est pas fini,
Une réprimande reçue!...
Le déshonneur d'être puni!

[O the unlearned lesson,
The unfinished homework,
A reprimand received!...
The dishonour of punishment!]

Never had they appeared so defenceless, so incapable of resilience against adverse fortune; never had they manifested such fragile constitutions. They writhed constantly in the anguished torment of the flayed alive. All these tender, wounded hearts cried out for deliverance. Yet they weren't at the end of their ordeals. A new servitude had entered the life of intellectuals, unknown to their elders and which the law had permitted one to evade before 1870: compulsory military service. At the very moment when, studies completed and diplomas secured, the young man prepared to breathe freely, the

regiment claimed him. The most fortunate had to fulfil the one-year military service, advantageously decorated with the name "voluntary service," and there they were, plunged back into exile. Back into confinement, under the rod, into unfortunate promiscuities. The first contact between graduates and the barrack-room populace proved rather disagreeable. We have its echo in the books they published upon returning home, where they didn't fail to vent their rancour: Henry Fèvre's *Au port d'armes*, Lucien Descaves's *Misères du Sabre* and *Sous-Offs*, Abel Hermant's *Le Cavalier Miserey*, Paul Bounetain's *Le Nommé Perreux*, and countless others.

This tedious peacetime discipline, these barrack fatigues, this mechanical garrison life weren't made for them. Their patriotism isn't at issue here, though they would have been excusable for yielding to the seductions of the fashionable pacifist ideal. Their grievance wasn't with serving but with the conditions of service, with being thrown without transition from the intelligent milieu of schools into the crude rusticity of barrack rooms, from the sedentary life of books to the physical activity of camps. Their grievance was finding themselves undervalued, abandoned defenceless to the arrogance of petty officers eager to avenge their social inferiority by making them feel more harshly the accidental superiority of their stripes. It was a false conception of equality that placed, without prior apprenticeship, shovels and pickaxes in hands hitherto exercised only in the delicate handling of the pen, and condemned to navvy's labour bodies too fragile to straighten from the stoop of desks. Their complaints weren't futile, moreover, since by denouncing intolerable abuses they contributed to their elimination. Thanks to them, military morals were purified and sanitised to a considerable degree, and today's young recruits are spared countless sources of revulsion. We owe to them the establishment of libraries. The beneficial effects of their campaign made themselves felt even in the disciplinary companies and military prisons where certain intellectuals like Dubois-Dessaule and Darien had been sent, not for crimes but for their libertarian ideas, by simple crime of opinion.

Certainly, people of robust health make light of all trials and muddle through somehow. They know how to oppose excessive demands with the force of inertia. Common, coarse souls don't allow themselves to be easily breached. For them, these are mere trifles and petty miseries. But fine, scrupulous souls wound and bruise themselves for life. The poet rejoins his hearth bearing an incurable wound, and if he lacks fortune, fresh disappointment awaits. A career must be chosen. The parents' dream is the civil service. Let him not think of escaping this dreary, cloistered prospect of a horizonless life amidst the dust of paperwork and green cardboard files. Above all, let him not think of expressing a desire for free and independent life. He feels himself unfit for commerce and finance, but let him not even allude to the disreputable career of letters (for at that time, to respectable people, bohemia and literature were one and the same) if he doesn't want to incur paternal malediction and hear his mother cry out in a surge of indignation and revolt:

> *Ah! que n'ai-je mis bas tout un nœud de vipères*
> *Plutôt que de nourrir cette dérision!*
>
> [Ah! Why didn't I bring forth a nest of vipers
> Rather than nourish this mockery!]

And if the young man persists, there's the door. Let him go! But why persist and deliberate? Deep down, the choice matters little to him. Whether he goes to bohemia or the civil service, the morbid germ he carries warns him he won't escape his destiny. The contamination is the same in the bohemian's garret or the office. Whether he moulds here or there, the result is equally certain. The victims of consumption are beyond counting in the world of letters. Without going back to Gilbert, Millevoye, Maurice de Guérin, Glatigny, we have Jules Laforgue, Albert Samain, Édouard Dubus, Léon Dequillebecq, Ephraïm Mickhaël, Albert Aurier, Jean de Tinan, Julien Leclercq, Charles Guérin, Henri Degron, Alfred Jarry. What defects and crushing heredities they received in the cradle! Add Jules Renard, dead at forty of arteriosclerosis. Ah! How understandable their pessimism becomes! Only one of the first-hour symbolists sang of joy: Francis Viélé-Griffin—but he came from elsewhere, from Norfolk in the United States. He was a man of another race. There's also Verhaeren, dazzled by life, but he's Belgian. Our own—Laforgue, Samain, Le Cardonnel, Charles Guérin—moan in despair.

The most resistant, those who miraculously escaped being ill-born, school contagion, urban epidemics, those who miraculously brought back healthy bodies from their passage through garrison dives and Latin Quarter brasseries[7], nonetheless suffered in their souls' depths from profound disarray.

No one had thought to guide them or impose moral discipline. Their education was null at home, pernicious at school. In former times, teaching concerned itself with opening youth's understanding, sharpening discernment, inculcating principles and rules of conduct. The gain from philosophy, our ancestors believed, was to make us wise and better. Its only utility, our moderns think, is to furnish us with a diploma. To this end, minds are stuffed with indigestible science. Overloaded syllabi no longer allow anything to be studied thoroughly. There's barely time to skim the surface, like those hurried museum visitors jostling at visiting hours whilst the guide recites his lesson in a monotone. Thus does the professor, reviewing schools of literature and philosophy upon which he has no leisure to dwell. Everything is fragments and anecdotes. History reduces to a succession of dates. Science becomes a chaos of formulae. From nothing is the substance and marrow extracted. School is a dreary cinema. The films unroll at speed. Nothing is absorbed. The divided University lacks doctrinal unity and sends its disciples away rudderless.

Let me take an example from what occurred at the Lycée Charlemagne where I studied. One of our rhetoric teachers, M. de la Coulonge, an idealist of the Cousin and Villemain school, had barely finished inflaming us with his warm, exalted eloquence when his colleague, M. Cartaut, sceptical and mocking, would destroy the effect. Thus their teaching neutralised itself, leaving us unsupported, suspended in a void. With Cartaut, mockery had penetrated the old emphatic and solemn instruction. It became a watchword among the last Normaliens to affect boulevard wit and abandon the study of the classics in their charge to devote themselves to journalism, to studying fashionable novelists and vaudevillists. Thus did Edmond About, Sarcey, Jules Lemaître... I won't mention Richepin, who had deliberately severed all moorings with his rue d'Ulm past. The same disorder reigned in philosophy. We began the year with M. Lebègue, a sort of mystagogue nourished at Plotinus's school, who swept us away in his wake amidst flights of angels in his ascension to the seventh heaven, and we finished with Gabriel Séailles, a positivist who tumbled us back to earth and showed us happiness in building a socialist Salente. Moreover, he had known how to win our complete confidence through his lively, imaginative speech, his frank and pleasant nature, his obliging attentiveness. We didn't like being summoned to satisfy our legitimate instincts and hearing him glorify life. Nevertheless, so many contrary perspectives created tensions, anchored us poorly in certainty. Youth's vision was all the more

clouded as everything happening around them contributed to widening the fissure and worsening the muddle.

The politics of the day drifted from extreme right to extreme left, marking a versatile and disoriented public opinion, fruit of ongoing cosmopolitan agitation. The princes are expelled, yet all Paris sings Mac-Nab's song mocking the measure. Mac-Nab is a City Hall functionary, which doesn't prevent him from discrediting republican municipal councillors as tainted with bad form. People pride themselves on displaying contempt for institutions. They exhibit royalist faith through snobbery like a well-cut coat from the right tailor. Decidedly, Marianne will never know how to dress like duchesses. The targeted municipal councillors don't dare respond severely. Students at Saint-Cyr cry "Long live the King!" and, tearing down the tricolour planted on their school, remove the red and blue bands to let only the white fly, emblem of their preferences. Construction continues on the Sacré-Cœur basilica. All France, devoted to its cult, makes pilgrimage there, whilst M. Pierre Laffitte deliberates: "We must accustom ourselves to regarding belief in God as incompatible with any public function." They proclaim at public meetings: "No entity should find grace before cold criticism—none—not even the Fatherland!" and the crowd applauds, but leaving these meetings, they acclaim on his white horse the passing new Minister of War, General Boulanger, and the day they think they spy a German flag at one of the Continental Hotel's windows, they grow indignant, cry scandal, and want to sack the hotel.

Still they comment, here and there in schools, on Lamartine's verse:

L'homme est un dieu déchu qui se souvient des cieux.
[Man is a fallen god who remembers heaven.]

But outside they mock it. "Man is a perfected ape," retorts M. Carl Vogt, "better that than a degenerate Adam."

And new winds sweep across space, making studious youth tremble behind their bars. They sense an approaching revelation, something like

Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo
[A great order of ages is born anew]

- something unknown but with which the hour is pregnant. They divine from the electric shocks that jolt them at intervals that mysterious and formidable forces are stirring somewhere, en route to overturn the world. For at the very hour the symbolist generation was born, two religions were taking shape from which these already wavering spirits would receive fresh shock:

1. Spiritualism;

2. Anarchism.

It was in 1864 that Allan Kardec published his book *L'imitation de l'Évangile selon le spiritisme*. True, he had been directing the Revue spirite since 1857 and was merely introducing to France a doctrine already professed in America, but so exploited by charlatans that it seemed discredited forever. Even after Allan Kardec's book appeared, the Davenport brothers' trickery would add to its disrepute, and people would be tempted to see in spiritualist practices nothing but a scheme to fleece public credulity. Only a small band of convinced adherents pursued their research in the shadows. In England,

where people are less quick to smile and lose heart than in France, experiments proceeded apace. Lord Lyndsay invited the famous American medium Home to his Scottish castle. Troubling séances ensued, which the Englishman Wallace reported as a trustworthy witness. His inquiry, published in London around 1880, brought attention back to Allan Kardec's doctrine, which an impressive event would rehabilitate: the appearance of Crookes's The Psychic Force. This book caused considerable sensation. Crookes was the inventor of radiant matter, which led to the discovery of X-rays, called cathodic rays, nowadays used in laboratories and applied to medical and surgical services. His worldwide reputation as a physicist-chemist sufficed to dismiss any idea of mystification. This was no longer about tall tales. These were real facts, duly observed and recorded, which even the most suspicious minds were forced to acknowledge, and thus the Psychic Society of London was created, proposing to submit all phenomena of spectral apparitions and materialisation to the rigorous control of judgment and reason. In France, Colonel de Rochas's experiments, the works of Édouard Schuré, Flammarion, and others, completed the orientation of research towards manifestations of the Beyond and dealt repeated blows to the doctrine of official materialism.

It was by invoking results definitively acquired in the domain of clairvoyance that M. Camille Flammarion would soon conclude: "The soul is not an empty word. It exists as truly as the body, though invisible and imponderable. It is endowed with faculties permitting it to act outside the sensory sphere, to communicate at distance in telepathic phenomena, to see through opaque bodies, to traverse space and time, to read the book of the Past as well as the unwritten book of the Future."

To those astonished by the boldness of this affirmation, M. Édouard Schuré offers for meditation the opinions of men of science. He invokes M. Émile Boutroux's testimony: "There is no unknowable other than the unknown—that is, what we don't know today but may perhaps know tomorrow," and M. Bergson's: "Philosophy is merely a conscious and reflective return to the data of intuition." He recalls these words from M. Sabatier, Dean of the Faculty of Sciences at Montpellier: "The concentrated psychic cerebral centres are accumulators of the diffuse psychic element spread throughout the Universe, which reaches them through peripheral nerves, through sense organs and the nerve cords connecting them to the cerebral centre[8]." The demonstration thus seems made, as Myers says, that a spiritual universe exists around us, in intimate rapport with the material universe.

Youth wasn't instructed in these matters, but breathed them in the air of the times and received from them, unwittingly, a fever of spirituality, whilst all felt themselves equally drawn by an unbridled need for emancipation coming from another source, from the depths of libertarian doctrines.

It was in 1864 that the history of anarchism begins. On 28 September 1864, the International Workers' Association dissolved at the Saint-Martin's Hall meeting in London, following the coup by the German Karl Marx who proclaimed himself its dictator. The Russian Bakunin, faithful to Proudhonian ideas, led away the dissidents who protested both against Marx's tyranny and against collectivist centralisation of power. They claimed the rights of autonomy and federation of groups. The schism deepened progressively, and the definitive rupture would occur at The Hague Congress (1872).

Bakunin had sown the seed of anarchism that the Italian Carlo Cafiero would cultivate and another Russian, Kropotkin, would formulate. Thenceforth opened an era of agitations, attacks, and trials whose salient dates we may note thus:

1879 — Foundation of Kropotkin's *Le Révolté*

1880 — Élisée Reclus's Geneva conference (Évolution et révolution)

1881 — London Anarchist Congress

1882 — Geneva International Conference

1885 — Appearance of Kropotkin's *Paroles d'un révolté*

In 1892, Ravachol's Paris trial showed through press discussions that the majority of intellectuals were, if not won over, at least sympathetic to anarchist doctrine, and the effect manifested itself in the 1893 opening of the Théâtre d'art social, where party militants mingled freely with new writers.

The symbolists had inherited from the Second Empire generation of writers a disinterest in public affairs. They felt no inclination to descend into the streets to participate in strikes, uprisings, or riots. Yet they invited Louise Michel and anarchist comrades to their meetings, and it's to anarchist influence we must attribute their contempt for rules and masters and their obstinate insistence on answering, in all questions of metrics and form, only to their own caprice.

But whilst the symbolists remained fiercely individualistic and divided on means of expression, they found themselves united by the same fixed idea, the same immutable sentiment: hatred of commercial literature, the cult of pure poetry, and the fervour to consecrate themselves to it.

Each age has its particular brand of arrivistes, especially since the Revolution, when the overthrow of barriers unleashed the surge of covetousness. The symbolists (I speak of the elite) scorned the procedures hitherto employed in the *Art de parvenir* [Art of getting ahead].

They seemed to take pleasure in conquering through their own efforts, imposing themselves against wind and tide through the sole force of their genius. They didn't care about "arriving"—neither through flattery, like ancien régime poets for whom an opportune dedication often sufficed to open doors to consideration and fortune, nor through cunning like Julien Sorel, nor through women like Lucien de Rubempré. They knew, of course, the ambitious designs and violent appetites of Rastignac, which make him say, contemplating Paris from a height with fist extended in heroic defiance: "Now, it's between the two of us!" But they despised his scheming and stratagems. They were worth more than Joseph Delorme. If they sometimes chafed at wandering like him—poor, unknown—through wealthy quarters and the festive city, they possessed neither his bile nor bitterness nor that base envy that made him consider others' success as theft from his portion of destiny. They sang in their isolation with the same assurance as if the entire universe hung upon their lips, and one must do them the justice of acknowledging that whilst they loved applause, they sought it proudly, without sycophancy or baseness. The best among them remain models of disinterestedness and literary probity. Consider Jules Laforgue. He reproaches himself, as a dereliction of his strictest duties, for having yielded to the temptation of reading his verses in public—and this before an assembly of comrades—but it was the brasserie atmosphere where he'd read them that offended his modesty. Set against this the presumption of vulgar arrivistes and today's poets. How touching this humility, this discreet, self-effacing bearing of Jules Laforgue, especially when one considers the quality of his talent! He doesn't dare enter a shop to buy two sous' worth of charcuterie, intimidated by the bearing of the opulent matron enthroned at her marble counter beneath her rich astrakhan palatine, amidst the gleam of gilded mirrors. In true poets, modesty allies itself with legitimate pride. They know their worth, but they also know that only

mediocre souls are capable of showing off, intrigue, and "bluff." Their native dignity refuses compromise and base petitions. How could they endure impatience and rebuffs without blushing? No more than they bow before false glories do they take their judgments from fashion. They make it their law to pay homage to unrecognised genius. They acclaim a Villiers, a Mallarmé, a Verlaine who command no influence. One sees clearly it's neither through calculation nor for profit. They pass disdainfully before official decorations and sinecures, despising the pensioned Muse. If there are among the established those they esteem, they content themselves with praising them from afar, or if they stray into salons, they feel out of place among society people. Not knowing how to dissemble, they bring only awkwardness.

Consider Albert Samain's adventure when he once ventured to present himself at Théodore de Banville's home. He had nothing to ask, after all. He didn't approach as a supplicant. He came to thank him for a courteous letter he'd received. He obeyed only an impulse of sympathy and gratitude. He believed he had only to let his heart speak. It went badly for him. He nearly got thrown out. During the interview, begun on an affable note, didn't Samain have the naivety to confess to Banville that he'd never read a verse of Victor Hugo? There's Banville rising, white with indignation and anger. Doubtless to retrieve the gaffe and excuse himself, Samain must have pleaded his poverty, which hadn't permitted him to procure the Master's works. This only made matters worse. Banville, finishing him off with a glare, cried: "Well, Mossieu, I would have sold my shirt to meet the expense!" Unfortunate Samain! That's what comes of approaching masters without a provision of courtier's arts or prior instruction in their little manias. Ah! How quickly a modern arriviste would have won over Banville with a lie! Return, candid Samain, to your solitude and count no longer on anything but happy chance for success. Doubtless Banville was right to be astonished, but you're too pure and scrupulous to pride yourself on worldly wisdom. You're one of those whom "a sharp vivacity of soul," as Montaigne says, paralyses and renders unfit for the artifice of petty negotiations. You lack cunning. You'll never possess the notoriety that suppleness of spine and servility of spirit procure. You'll never be seen shining in a salon or in the "echoes" or in boulevard cafés. You're only capable of obtaining the one thing that can't be bought through base tricks and vulgar cleverness: Glory! But you won't live long enough to taste its fruits. O poor, great Samain, you'll have tasted only its bitterness here below.

The Expression of Love in Symbolist Poetry

The generation that immediately preceded the Symbolists had made its mark through its misogyny. To the Romantic prejudices it had inherited concerning the femme fatale, it now added the influence of Schopenhauer, newly discovered, who denied women any spark of intelligence or genuine beauty. Schopenhauer set out to prove that feminine allure exists only in our minds—what draws us to women is merely instinct's siren call. Their power is illusory. "And they wield it shamelessly," added Baudelaire, who gathered up all the prejudices and suspicions of religious dogma, haunted still by that vision of Eve the temptress, eternal seductress whose smile engineers our damnation, wellspring of all Sin:

Machine aveugle et sourde, en cruautés féconde.
[Blind and deaf machine, breeding cruelties.]

With less bombast but equal persistence, Charles Cros, even whilst succumbing to enchantment, denounces woman's savagery; Corbière her duplicity; Rimbaud her feebleness and folly. Verlaine portrays her shepherding her flock of dupes, and even the sentimental Coppée compares her to the executioner-soldiers she adores precisely because they too draw blood from hearts.

Competing with the poets, the novelists and playwrights of the day elaborate this theme with relish. The Goncourt brothers fret about woman's intrusion into the artist's life, accusing her of sapping courage, quenching inspiration, smothering free genius. They give the eternal feminine the face of a Manette Salomon. So deeply rooted is this notion of woman as enemy that even the heroines they intend as sympathetic—Renée Mauperin, Sœur Philomène—unknowingly harm those who approach them and unconsciously precipitate disasters. Prosper Mérimée, revisiting the lesson of Manon Lescaut with even darker tragedy, demonstrates through Carmen to what depths of degradation a woman can drag an honest fellow. Émile Augier and Sardou eagerly parade her treacheries and stratagems on stage, warning us against her cunning assaults. Zola embodies in Nana all vice's corrosive power, making woman an agent of social decay. Alexandre Dumas fils advises us coldly: "Kill her!"

This was the courtesan's heyday, the era of false households. Surveying such accumulated wreckage, Alphonse Daudet trembles for his sons. He writes *Sapho* for their benefit, casting his indictment before their twenty-year-old minds for contemplation. A thoroughly unnecessary precaution. The rising generation will hardly burden itself with its elders' scruples, and whilst women may still wreak their havoc amongst them, at least they'll no longer be their dupes. The adventure won't risk turning tragic. The danger for them lies elsewhere. These newcomers will possess a keener sense of reality and will stop blaming women for their own failings. When the poet Edmond Haraucourt, borrowing Schopenhauer's idea, suggests that:

La Beauté de la femme est dans les nerfs de l'homme,
[Woman's beauty lives in man's nerves,]

this generation will no longer possess nerves robust enough to grant such beauty irresistible sway. The race, depleted by long prosperity and repeated sacrifices, the heavy toll of past wars and revolutions, will prove less susceptible to sorcery. Let fathers cease their trembling and stop brandishing the bogey of wicked enchantresses. "These young ladies possess nothing quite so demonic, I assure you," one of Symbolism's first standard-bearers, the poet René Ghil, retorts[9]. Jules Laforgue, who follows, is too shrewd to demand the impossible from them. He no longer requires their heroism and devotion. For his beloved, beauty alone suffices:

Deux yeux café, voilà tous ses papiers.
[Two coffee-coloured eyes—those are her credentials.]

Wise to limit oneself to such summary formalities, since at bottom "all is but celibacy."

Likewise, Henri de Régnier understands the chasm dividing the sexes and knows it's madness to attempt bridging it. He draws his imagery no longer from Scripture but from Greek myth, understanding what truths lurk beneath the Sirens' fable. Besides, contemplating our civilisation reveals that if woman is corrupt and mercenary, man bears a hefty share of blame. And what does it matter, ultimately, if her beauty is mere sensory illusion, like fruit's flavour or the rose's perfume? "This illusion satisfies us," declares Jean Moréas (Notes sur Schopenhauer—*Revue indépendante*, March 1885), and since man will forever remain ignorant of things' true essence, knowing only how they affect his constitution, wouldn't prudence dictate accepting the phenomenon that amorous instinct presents regarding feminine beauty, without attempting to penetrate the impenetrable noumenon? The sky's azure too is optical illusion—yet that doesn't diminish the joy it brings! Stéphane Mallarmé plays the sage, inviting us in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* to let the Universe dazzle us whilst viewing it through Desire, as through the luminous flesh of emptied grapes. What matter if woman possesses only the unconscious life of things—shifting woods, flowing water, and flowers—when her smile means for us, as Gustave Kahn affirms:

la clarté sur les îles
Les îles blanches du lointain,
Qui s'éveillent sous le frais matin
De toutes leurs gerbes éblouies.

[light upon the islands
The white isles of the distance,
Awakening in fresh morning
With all their dazzled sheaves ablaze.]

What matter if she's merely animal and perverse, when her presence brings us ease and dreams blossom in her wake? Let's welcome her as exquisite fabric upon which to embroider our fancies.

O douce chose printanière,
O jeune femme, ô fleur superbe.
Épanouis ta nudité
Royale, emmi tes sœurs de l'herbe.

Reste ainsi: l'ombre violette
Se joue aux roses plis des hanches;
Ouvre tes grands yeux puérils
Où rit l'orgueil de tes chairs blanches.

[O sweet springtime creature,
O young woman, o splendid flower.
Unfurl your nakedness
Royal, amongst your grassy sisters.

Stay thus: violet shadow
Plays on your hips' rosy folds;
Open wide your childlike eyes
Where white flesh's pride is laughing.]

So sings Francis Vielé-Griffin, who, limiting Love to contemplative pleasure alone, protects himself, like Stéphane Mallarmé, from that

parfum de tristesse
Que, même sans dégoût et sans déboire, laisse
La cueillaison d'un rêve aux doigts qui l'ont cueilli.

[perfume of sadness
That, even without disgust or disappointment, lingers from
Dream-gathering in the fingers that have plucked it.]

To bind oneself like Ulysses to the mast—that's taking out solid insurance against disappointment, savouring without peril the sweetness of treacherous voices. The poets of this hour incline toward caution, loving only in imagination and stage-setting.

"Ardent yet discouraged"—thus Maurice Barrès aptly characterised his generation. None was more consumed by appetites, impulses, ambitions. None more convinced of effort's futility, its impotence to alter destiny's fixed order. These poets dream of intense living. They lash themselves toward action. They endlessly exhort themselves, like Charles Guérin:

Avec un grand frisson plonge-toi dans la vie.
[Plunge with a shudder into life.]

Yet always, at the crucial moment, they recoil from its icy touch. "Act! Act!" Baudelaire had already cried, before returning to the wisdom of motionless owls, knowing we always pay the price for wanting to change position. Albert Samain resigns himself to solitude. He shuts his door against the street's clamour[10] and, forehead pressed to the windowpane like some infanta banished to her distant Escorial, desires only to watch his nostalgic golden dream unfold on the horizon. Spiteful at his inability to mould the world to his liking, he carves himself a vast dream-empire from the clouds.

Pense, domine l'Age et respire l'espace.
N'espère pas. L'espoir est un oiseau rapace.
Vis, si tu peux, dans l'éternel, l'heure qui passe.

[Think, master time and breathe in space.
Hope not. Hope is a bird of prey.
Live, if you can, the passing hour in the eternal.]

Before him, Corbière and Laforgue had exiled themselves from the crowd. What Samain's muse sighs forth in ceremonial robes, theirs whistles in spangled harlequin rags, with tumbles and grimaces:

Et je laisse la vie
Pleuvoir sans me mouiller.

[And I let life
Rain down without getting wet.]

Action isn't merely futile, Jules Tellier insists—action is perilous. Flailing blindly in destiny's darkness, one always risks injuring some occult, mysterious power and unleashing its vengeful fury. Chasing fortune is sheer folly. Let us therefore live Tel qu'en songe [As if in dreams], Henri de Régnier decides. Since all is mere appearance and illusion, let's spare ourselves going to "harvest remorse amongst the servile crowd." Let's dwell in contemplation within our ivory tower[11]. We have flowers, music, and books for consolation. Let's select from history a hero to our taste whose gestures we'll rehearse before the mirror. Let's be Caesar, Cyrus, Hamlet—and should we fancy playing Don Juan, the past offers heroines enough of every stripe for us to gather trophies at will. At twelve, in an attic, Rimbaud had known all the women of the Old Masters. Leafing through "magazines," Francis Jammes falls for Clara d'Ellebeuse, little schoolgirl from vanished boarding schools. Beautiful dead women beckon from their gilded frames or smile with marble lips. Here stand Phryne, Aspasia, Cleopatra. Let's love them. Their phantoms will yield, pliant, to our caresses, and should we need some semblance of reality, let's ask the first contemporary woman we meet to assist the illusion by playing their part briefly. We'll feed her the lines, but for heaven's sake, let her not be taken in and believe our homage real. We require only a simulacrum, and she must understand that if we seek refuge in living eyes, it's always to flee the world itself. Of the two oars with which I navigate, says Albert Samain:

L'une est langueur, l'autre est silence.
[One is languor, the other silence.]

Silence is precious to this hour's poets, particularly in love. One ill-chosen word would shatter the spell so swiftly!

"Hush, hush!" they ceaselessly implore their beloveds.

À cette heure un langage humain serait profane. [Human speech would be profane at this hour.] (Louis le Cardonnel.)

Je te disais « Tais-toi » quand tu ne disais rien. [I said "Be quiet" when you were saying nothing.] (Francis Jammes.)

Ne parlez pas... Le silence vaut mieux. [Don't speak... Silence is better.] (Émile Depax.)

Give me your hand. Let's sit beneath the shade. Twilight falls. Let's listen to the breeze's murmur and dream:

Va, l'étreinte jalouse et le spasme obsesseur
Ne valent pas un long baiser même qui mente.

[Come, jealous embraces and obsessive spasms
Aren't worth even one long, lying kiss.] (Paul Verlaine.)

Don't fret about this lengthy kiss. It's the maternal kiss, the elder sister's blessing. It carries no heat. It follows the watchword:

De la douceur, de la douceur, de la douceur!
[Gentleness, gentleness, gentleness!]

Yet sometimes the poet refuses even this.

Vers elle, je penchais ma lèvre mais sans prendre
Le baiser qu'elle s'attendait à recueillir.

[I bent my lips toward her but didn't take
The kiss she expected to receive.] (Francis Jammes.)

The poet suffers. He needs cradling. He surrenders like a child to the maternal breast. Flesh no longer matters. This isn't a woman but an angel keeping vigil beside him. Her embrace is spiritual.

Et je baise ta chair angélique aux paupières.
[And I kiss your angelic flesh upon the eyelids.] (Albert Samain.)

He yields to ecstasy, yet keeps his footing. He knows all is deception and illusion:

O parcourons le plus de gammes
Car il n'y a pas autre chose,

[O let's run through all the scales we can
For there is nothing else,]
sighs Jules Laforgue.

One approaches love calmly, as one might a window, to survey distant vistas. For some, it's distraction from living's tedious ennui; for others, material to enrich their sensibility and live out a chapter in the "Cult of the Self." The partner becomes mere pretext, playing a mute role. During the soliloquy's unfolding, they might doze off—all the better. Francis Jammes prefers evoking his beloved in slumber's pose:

Tu serais nue sur la bruyère humide et rose,
Tu dormirais en ne rêvant d'aucune chose.

[You'd lie naked on the damp pink heather,
Sleeping, dreaming of nothing whatsoever.]

And he'd gladly succumb to the contagion:

Je voudrais me coucher et je m'endormirais.
Laisse-moi t'endormir et tu m'endormiras.

[I'd like to lie down and fall asleep.
Let me lull you to sleep and you'll lull me.]

"I love you because you sleep," Charles Guérin tells his heart's lady. She might slip away at certain hours without the lover noticing or breaking his reverie. Equal indolence reigns in the opposing camp.

Mme de Noailles no longer knows whether her tenderness flows toward landscape or adolescent. Were a young heart near my shoulder, she confesses,

Je lui dirais: ce n'est pas vous,
C'est toute la nuit qui me tente.
……..
Vous n'êtes qu'un adolescent;
C'est à la nuit que je dévoile
Mon cœur qui fond l'or de mon sang
Et mon corps triste jusqu'aux moelles.
Ne dites rien! Je ne réclame
De vous que vos regards meurtris…

[I'd tell him: it isn't you,
It's all the night that tempts me.
…….

You're merely an adolescent;
To the night I unveil
My heart that melts my blood's gold
And my body sad to the marrow.
Say nothing! All I ask
From you are your wounded glances…]

Love is "egoism for two," claimed Mme de Staël, but contemporaries economise on sharing, from prudence as much as pride:

Je repousse le cœur qui m'attend et m'appelle.
Et je suis cette nuit amoureuse de moi,
De mes yeux sans espoir, de ma voix immortelle.

[I spurn the heart that waits and calls to me.
And I am tonight in love with myself,
With my hopeless eyes, my deathless voice.]

Mme de Noailles again. To rock themselves with love's illusion, they no longer need to venture beyond themselves. They've learned to trigger ecstasy at will.

L'impuissance d'aimer! [The Powerlessness to Love!]—this is the title Jean de Tinan gives his account of sentimental adventure, published in 1894 in Paris (11, rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin). He's careful to warn us that this document speaks for his entire generation: "I shall tell you something about young women and young men... The incoherence of their contrived emotions... Ah! the utter insignificance of it all!" The book bears a frontispiece by Félicien Rops: a hieratic woman weighing the infant Cupid, inhaling him like prey, amid a stylised landscape of trees, flowers, and ibises. Here's the story:

Jean de Tinan has encountered a pair of magnetic eyes in society. The lady is beautiful and receptive to courtship. The adventure beckons. Yet he hesitates to commit. Barely twenty, he loves the idea of love, and still he hesitates: "The moment I begin to love, I cannot rest until I've so thoroughly dissected both her feelings and mine that all love becomes impossible." Tolstoy's definition defeats him: "To love is to prefer another to oneself." He'll never blind himself to such a degree. His passion remains lucid, discovering flaws beneath the beloved's perfections. He dreads the adventure, its aftermath, its complications. "I can only exhaust or diminish myself," and he despairs. "Ah! these months spent gathering momentum, only never to leap."

Yet he engages, come what may, but as the flirtation proceeds, he perceives their fundamental discord—both singing the same melody in different keys. His beloved puzzles over his reticence, his timidity. "What is it you want?" she asks one day, anxious, and he admits: "I don't know what I want." The truth. He cannot untangle such confused and disparate impressions. He fears being forced to tell himself: "I was carried away, I hit a snag." Her beauty attracts him, yet secret bitterness poisons all present pleasures. He recovers them only as memories. Then, in thought's solitude, he exalts himself. He loves through images. He sees her again at the harpsichord, lamp-lit, in the chamber's intimate atmosphere, whilst the curtain stirs in summer night breezes, and feels himself powerfully smitten—but such capricious, unjust reversals! He lets slip: "She was charming, but I wasn't in the mood to enjoy it," and concludes: "It's all too complicated. I genuinely admire people who love simply. We've read too many volumes at 7 francs 50 to love like ordinary mortals."

"We paralyse the heart through excessive lucidity, and besides, why demand from women what we don't offer in return: sincerity[12]?"

And he adds this devastating phrase: "We'd be thoroughly vile if we weren't so naive." All this already exists in Baudelaire, but how swiftly and extensively the contagion has spread! Jean de Tinan was born world-weary, like his generation's elite. He cannot reconcile such contradictory impulses. Religious atavism weighs upon him too: "All these kisses taste of earth." Simultaneously, Charles Guérin writes:

Toute chair à ma bouche a le goût du Péché.
[All flesh tastes of Sin upon my lips.]

"We don't love each other," thinks Jean de Tinan, "but would it be so different if we did?" This, just as Rémy de Gourmont concedes: "I love inaction, postponement; there's little difference between dreams and their fulfilment." So why pursue the adventure? Let everything remain potential. Let's dream our dream. Flaubert was right: "Souls embrace better than bodies." Tinan veers toward mystical delirium. "Had I a sister, how I would have loved her!" He tells his beloved: "I want to see your soul that your thoughts conceal from me." To voice his emotions, delicate, marvellous liturgical metaphors rise to his lips:

Causa nostrae laetitiae
Stella matutina[tn15].

[Cause of our joy
Morning star]

He's losing his bearings, going off the rails. "I wish her naked beauty would reveal to me the god-world's metaphysical beauty... To grasp the absolute by specialising its attributes symbolised through impressions of her... To discover blazing revelations in the mysteries of correspondences!..."

Still, forever Baudelaire. Such strain brings swift exhaustion. Jean de Tinan has but one concern: extrication. One fine morning he announces his departure, and his beloved, long since disillusioned, receives this news with relief. She'd confided the previous day: "Despite wanting to see Marcel, I'd rather like him to leave. Playing with fire like this, one never knows what might happen."

This is the epoch of painless partings. Jean Ajalbert shows us in one novel a lover abandoning his mistress, who begs for a meeting, with merely: "I'll write!"—and no intention of doing so. No longer need one fear, even amongst the most passionate, that love will precipitate rash acts and madness. The Parnassians had already felt, for identical reasons, drawn to prudence. There's something like an admission of impotence in Sully-Prudhomme's renunciation. The hour has struck for swoons without consequences and, as Corbière puts it, "little deaths for laughs."

Dodelinette à nos petits péchés.
[Lullaby to our little sins.]

Thus croons Charles Vignier's emancipating refrain. And should one still fear entanglement in beauty's snares, this poet suggests immediate liberation from illusion:

Or l'œuvre voilé par la nuit des brocatelles,
Vit se magnifier un rêve inattendu,
Mais, dans son pur dédain, il l'a bientôt par tels
Insolites secrets, à son néant rendu.

[Now the work veiled by brocaded night
Saw an unexpected dream magnified,
But in its pure disdain, through such
Strange secrets, soon returned it to the void.]

These intellectual friendships to which Symbolist poets would reduce Love leave too many natural yearnings unfulfilled not to end in disappointment. Jean de Tinan discovers this, supposing: "Perhaps only debauchery rings true, leaving the least rancour behind." He comes to "crave the charm of the senses... bestial intoxication where thought no longer intrudes." Baudelaire too had hoped to soothe his pain on "beds of chance." Mallarmé sought there "heavy, dreamless sleep," and before them, Musset had made the experiment. Ask them their opinion! The trouble is, Rémy de Gourmont tells us, they haven't purged the Syrian poison. The world has thrown off Christian dogma, yet its morality still burdens consciousness. Nietzsche marvels at this, labouring to destroy it and liberate life. His disciples multiply, hurling themselves at the old world, weapons drawn. The avant-garde journals brim with manifestos denouncing moral prejudice. M. Chevrier in the *Revue indépendante* (August 1884 and February 1885) demands carnal freedom as corollary to freedom of conscience, proposes that every human being reign as sovereign master over body as over thought, that individual taste be passion's sole law, and decrees that morality, defined as the rule of conduct, attacks liberty itself. Rémy de Gourmont beckons us to rediscover pagan joy, primordial innocence, to find repose in pure sensual delight. In his Nuit au Luxembourg, he presents as models two lovers whose sole satisfaction lies in "playing with their bodies"—but Rémy de Gourmont deceives himself. He too remains intoxicated by the Syrian poison, preoccupied with sin. The body hasn't been pardoned its infamous exile. Around its pleasures still hovers an odour of carnage and burning, reflections of infernal fires.

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Jean de Tinan has offered us these reasons for the languid passivity of his contemporaries: such an excess of exhaustion that they can no longer set sail for adventures on the open sea[13], and such an excess of lucidity that they cannot deceive themselves about those adventures. True, he brushes against religious scruple when he speaks of "kisses that taste of earth", but the younger generation's wariness of passion springs perhaps from something more than mere superstitious residue. I know well enough that one cannot easily smooth away a fold pressed deep through twenty centuries. All the same, the Church's interdiction perhaps weighs less in their hesitations than does the quality of their very nature and a certain pride distinctive to their generation. They possess that fanatical stiffening of Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*: "J'aime l'horreur d'être vierge..." ["I love the horror of being virgin..."] To wish to distinguish, as they do, between the soul's joys and the body's—this is already a noble ambition, yet the measure proves inadequate. The conflict endures. All must be absorbed into unity. One must either spiritualise the flesh or render the spirit material. The poets march towards spiritual unity.

How strange that nature should have mingled, as Montaigne observes, our filth with our pleasures, so that a man of delicate sensibility cannot expose himself to them without revulsion. Not Christians alone bring feelings of repugnance to this matter, but men of every faith across the whole expanse of the earth. Hear the Hindu poet, Rabindranath Tagore:

"J'essaie d'étreindre la beauté. Elle m'élude, ne laissant que le corps entre mes mains. — Confus et lassé, je retombe — comment pourrait le corps toucher la fleur que l'âme seule peut toucher?"

["I try to embrace beauty. She eludes me, leaving only the body in my hands. — Confused and weary, I fall back — how could the body touch the flower that only the soul can touch?"][14]

We have arrived at a point in civilisation where the chosen elite, the aristocracy of minds, even when purged of all pious concerns, blushes at the flesh's entreaties and bristles at the blood's tribute as at some dishonourable bondage. Rimbaud is right: "Love must be reinvented!"

"When shall I at last be master and god of my own breath?" laments René Ghil, harried by murky desires and migraines. Yet René Ghil knows that man received no law from the creator's hands. He has read Darwin, Haeckel... He has studied the mysteries of our origins, traced our evolution from the primitive monera[tn16]. He has traversed in imagination the carboniferous[tn17] marshes, the forests of the Mesozoic age. He knows our existence was represented in the Carboniferous period by some thing —some cold-blooded, viscous-skinned thing—that skulked between air and water, fleeing before that epoch's gigantic amphibians. He is versed, I imagine, in our palaeontological genesis and knows what bonds link us to the pithecoid[tn18] mammals. He knows that nature employs us merely as nourishing and fertile ferments to ensure the species' perpetuity: Totus homo semen est, tota mulier in utero. [All of man is seed, all of woman is womb.] He knows that morality had no foundation at first save hygienic necessity; that man continues his metamorphoses and that perhaps a day will come when, as Wells intimates, beings "now latent in our thoughts and hidden in our loins will stand upon this earth as upon a footstool, and burst into laughter, stretching forth their hands among the stars."[15]

"Ah! to flee! to escape!" implores Jules Tellier, who suffocates in his fleshly bonds. Yet Jules Tellier remains unimpressed by the theologians' reasoning. He has found the chink in their armour. "To explain the world through God," he reflects, "merely pushes the difficulty further back. One must still explain existence, whether in the form of a god or in that of the world."

Albert Samain has placed no hope in the vacant heavens. For him, the Virgin has closed her eyes and the Angels

Reposent les doigts joints au tombeau de leurs ailes.
[Lie with clasped hands upon the sepulchre of their wings.]

Yet he burns with a fury for chastity:

Je veux que mon corps vierge ainsi qu'un diamant
Ne soit jamais comme lui soit splendide et stérile.

["I desire my virgin body to be like a diamond,
Never to be as it is, both splendid and sterile."]

The dolorous Charles Guérin, withdrawn into himself in the depths of his narrow, petty province, whispers to himself "Be an atheist!" Yet his turbid youth troubles him. He yearns to cast off

Le bracelet pesant des voluptés humaines.
["The heavy bracelet of human pleasures."]

Faith does not drive him to stifle his desires, to mutilate himself; rather, it is revulsion at pleasure and the need to purify himself in loftier air—which will presently lead him to rediscover the vestiges of lost faith and clutch at them with desperate energy:

Je suis le plus méchant des mauvais serviteurs
Ô Jésus, qui prêchais la sagesse aux docteurs!
J'ai détourné le sens divin des paraboles.
J'ai, d'un grain vil, semé le champ de tes paroles.
Malheur à moi! car dans les vers que j'ai chantés,
La prière se mêle au cri des voluptés:
J'ai baisé tes pieds nus comme une chair de femme,
Et posé sur ton cœur ouvert un cœur infâme.
L'iniquité fut ma maîtresse. Et me voilà.
Tes yeux que le péché de l'univers scella
Me brûlent de leurs pleurs de sang...
Ah! ne le laisse pas mourir dans son Péché
Cet errant qui s'enlace à ta croix et qui pleure
Las d'avoir tant cherché l'Amour qui, seul, demeure.

["I am the wickedest of wicked servants,
O Jesus, who preached wisdom to the learned!
I have perverted the divine sense of the parables.
I have sown the field of your words with vile seed.
Woe unto me! for in the verses I have sung,
Prayer mingles with the cry of lust:
I have kissed your bare feet as a woman's flesh,
And laid upon your open heart a heart of shame.
Iniquity was my mistress. And here I stand.
Your eyes that the world's sin has sealed
Burn me with their tears of blood...
Ah! let him not Die in his Sin,
This wanderer who clings to your cross and weeps,
Weary from seeking so long the Love that alone endures."]

Stuart Merrill holds the conviction that "the dead are well and truly dead". No fear of future punishment turns him from gross sensuality. No hope of posthumous reward leads him to immure himself at last in dreams:

Qui font oublier sans retour,
Tous les masques et les mensonges
Dont se leurre le pauvre Amour.

["Which make one forget past all recall
All the masks and lies
With which poor Love deludes itself."]

where he awaits "death's sole maternal kiss".

"Lilies! Lilies! Lilies!" cries Laurent Tailhade, whom none could accuse of eucharistic reverence, moved solely by concern for human dignity.

"Be chaste", Germain Nouveau commands all mankind from the depths of his wandering exile.

Couronnement divin de la sagesse humaine
La Chasteté sourit à l'homme et le conduit;
L'Homme avec elle est roi; sans elle tout le mène.

La sagesse! Sans elle, un baiser la détruit:
Nul n'a contre un baiser de volonté suprême
Nul n'est sage le jour s'il n'est chaste la nuit…

Aimez la Chasteté, la plus douce victoire
Que César voit briller, qu'il ne remporte pas,
Dont les rayons, Hercule, effaceront ta gloire.

Le monde est une cage où le Mal, au front bas,
Est la ménagerie, et la dompteuse forte
Est cette Chasteté portant partout ses pas.

Elle entre dans la cage; elle en ferme la porte.
Elle tient sous ses yeux tous les vices hurlants,
Si jamais elle meurt, l'âme du monde est morte.

Mais elle est Daniel sous ses longs voiles blancs,
Daniel ne meurt pas car Dieu met des épées
Dans ses regards qui sont des feux étincelants.

Dans les fleurs, aux plis blancs de sa robe échappées,
Suivez sa chevelure au vent, comme le chien
Suit la flûte du pâtre au temps des épopées…

Elle cueille humblement dans la joie en éveil
Les lauriers les plus verts des plus nobles conquêtes
Sans vieux fracas d'acier ni dur clairon vermeil.

Elle rit aux dangers comme on rit dans les fêtes,
Devant ployer un jour tout sous sa volonté,
Plus grande, ô conquérants, que le bruit que vous faites

Et sans elle, il n'est pas d'entière majesté!

["Divine crown of human wisdom,
Chastity smiles upon man and guides him;
Man with her is king; without her, all things rule him.

Wisdom! Without it, a single kiss destroys:
None has supreme will against a kiss,
None is wise by day who is not chaste by night…

Love Chastity, the sweetest victory
That Caesar sees gleaming yet cannot win,
Whose rays, O Hercules, shall eclipse your glory.

The world is a cage where Evil, with lowered brow,
Forms the menagerie, and the mighty tamer
Is this Chastity bearing her steps everywhere.

She enters the cage; she locks its door.
She holds beneath her gaze all howling vices—
Should she ever die, the world's soul dies with her.

But she is Daniel beneath her long white veils,
Daniel dies not, for God sets swords
Within her gaze that flash with fire.

Into the flowers escaped from her white robes' folds,
Follow her windblown hair, as the dog
Follows the shepherd's flute in epic days of old…

She humbly gathers in awakening joy
The greenest laurels of the noblest conquests,
Without old clash of steel or harsh vermillion trumpet's voice.

She laughs at perils as one laughs at feasts,
One day she'll bend all things beneath her will,
Greater, O conquerors, than all your mighty noise—

For without her, there is no majesty fulfilled!"]

And the friend of Germain Nouveau, Louis Le Cardonnel, likewise thunders against "baneful love, despoiler of sleep". He proclaims "the poison of its deceptive charm":

La haine sourdement mêlée à ses transports,
La jalouse fureur qu'on nomme sa victoire.
Et les cœurs séparés quand s'enlacent les corps.

["Hatred insidiously mingled with its transports,
The jealous fury that men call its victory,
And hearts divided when bodies intertwine."]

He too denounces "enervating, carnal Aphrodite", "her nights of shame", and, touched by grace, begins to forge paths anew towards the city of God, thus prefiguring the manifold conversions soon to follow: Adolphe Retté, Francis Jammes, Charles Morice…

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So here they all are, believers and atheists alike, attempting chastity, though the ascent proves treacherous and their footing often fails them. They suffer appalling relapses. Verlaine takes it in his stride. Despairing of any impossible accord, he settles, with his bedrock of sturdy good humour, for a life lived on parallel tracks, seating himself squarely between vice and virtue. Washed clean of his wanderings by immediate contrition, he profits by never losing himself in the fog, never sacrificing either his keen wit or his reason. No one could ever level at him Louis le Cardonnel's reproach to Ludwig II of Bavaria:

Vous fûtes entraîné par le sabbat vainqueur,
Poussant votre cheval à travers les bois sombres.
Les mânes et la nuit vous ont pris votre cœur.
Car ce n'est pas en vain qu'on provoque les ombres.

[The conquering sabbath swept you away,
Spurring your horse through darkened woods.
The shades and night have claimed your heart—
For shadows, once provoked, exact their price.]

Verlaine will never endure the terrible hallucinations of the chaste, that torture of the desert hermit who sees rising on the horizon:

Les seins nus et pourprés de ses tentations.
[The naked, purple breasts of his temptations.]

He'll escape Nerval's suicide, Baudelaire's madness, Albert Samain's feverish nights, those sinister visions of a savage Salomé emerging from time's depths to "demand the white lamb of his heart and slaughter it."

Never will he find himself intoning the litanies of lust:

Fruit défendu qui fait claquer les dents d'envie
[Forbidden fruit that sets the teeth on edge with longing]

nor will he ever descend into bestial crises:

J'étais tigre parmi les tigresses lubriques.
[I was a tiger amongst lustful tigresses.]

Granted, for Samain this is merely a passing tempest. Soon enough he'll feel the silvery Star of tranquil dreams ascending once more in his heart—yet how horribly he suffers.

Should Verlaine happen to stray by night, like Charles Guérin, through deserted quarters

Où la prostituée écume les ténèbres,
[Where the prostitute prowls the shadows,]

he brings neither acute anguish, nor torment, nor an unhinged soul. He need only recall the old Spanish saw (for Verlaine was devilishly hispanophile) defienda me dios de my, and should he emerge somewhat the worse for wear, he'll find consolation in his beloved Ovid:

Nec vitiant artus aegræ contagia mentis.
[The sick mind's contagion doesn't taint the limbs.]

For chastity, you see, is not innocence. It's a militant virtue, revealing itself only through ruins and wounds.

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Ah, how diseased the world is! And how it proves its sickness through this relentless, obsessive return to its sexual affliction.

Alfred de Vigny was already lamenting the ceaseless coiling round mankind of that golden viper:

Toujours, ce compagnon dont le cœur n'est pas sûr,
La femme, enfant malade et douze fois impur.

[Forever this companion with the faithless heart—
Woman, that sickly child twelve times impure.]

He foresaw the hour when, exhausted by this pitiless duel:

Et se jetant de loin un regard irrité
Les deux sexes mourront chacun de leur côté.

[And casting angry glances from afar,
The two sexes will perish, each apart.]

His plaint echoes through the Parnassians:

Misérables vivants que le baiser tourmente.
[Wretched creatures whom the kiss torments.] (Sully Prudhomme)

The brutalists try in vain to mislead us, speaking of hearty feasting and wild abandon. They strain in vain to persuade us of their sturdy loins and satisfied pleasures as they wallow in the mire of debauchery.

Richepin blusters in vain:

L'Amour que je sens, l'Amour qui me cuit
N'est pas un amour chaste et platonique
Sorbet à la neige avec un biscuit
C'est l'amour de chair, c'est un plat tonique.

[The Love I feel, the Love that sears me
Isn't some chaste and platonic love—
Snow sorbet with a biscuit on the side—
It's carnal love, a dish that fortifies.]

Yet one senses immediately, if only from the artificiality of style, that this is pure swagger and bravado. These gentlemen are capable of no excess beyond the pun-rhyme, and beneath their brazen mask of tireless Hercules and Rabelaisian ogre, they're no more ravenous than the abstemious Auguste Dorchain, acclaimed author of *La Jeunesse pensive*, who recoils in horror from the words temptation murmurs in his ear and trembles at the very thought of a possible fall.

"Throughout the entire book," observes Jules Tellier with perhaps excessive irreverence towards a noble poet whose purely academic achievement he ought to have better appreciated, "M. Dorchain poses himself but one question: should he or shouldn't he surrender his innocence, and may he permit himself to consummate the work of the flesh outside the bonds of matrimony? Young Diafoirus's 'May I kiss, Papa?' becomes the poet's question to himself—and he denies himself permission.

"Those inflammatory speeches of d'Arcy in L'Abbesse de Jouarre—our versifier addresses them to himself, yet cannot swerve from duty's path. Not that he lacks for plausible arguments: 'You'll feel more settled afterwards, clearer-headed, you'll work more efficiently'—but immediately he catches himself and delivers a rebuke:

Ah, sophiste éhonté, cœur fragile, âme lâche
Tu glisses, malheureux
[Ah, shameless sophist! Fragile heart! Craven soul!
You're slipping, wretch!]

The delicious irony is that Jules Tellier, who here finds fit to ridicule Dorchain, knows precisely the same battles and laments with identical persistence the very same compulsions. The sole difference being that he waits until after succumbing to temptation before bewailing it. We find the same contradiction in Rémy de Gourmont, who declares Chastity "an aberration" whilst conforming his temperament to its demands, and who, having dismissed such scruples of conscience as childish, returns to them with such insistence that he merely reinforces them, redoubling both his anxiety and ours. He pronounces morality a mere matter of convention, fashion, and prejudice, especially harmful to artistic creation—which doesn't prevent him from condemning in its name the "loose morals" pervading contemporary literature. He goes so far as to maintain that the sexual instinct forms

humanity's intellectual axis. True enough, Love remains poetry's eternal theme, and whilst its practice has remained unchanged since the dawn of time, its literary expression shifts and transforms through the ages, to the point of defining a society's worth. Yet viewed solely from this perspective, one might say that Love has never been so steeped in bitterness, bile, disturbance and remorse as in the Symbolist era. Its journey through time has grown remarkably complex. No longer is it that allegorical fancy imported from the Crusades through contact with the chivalrous, courtly East. It has ceased to be that simple inflammation of our Gallic raconteurs, which Mathurin Régnier mentions and which Villon accommodated beside fat Margot. No longer, as in the sixteenth century after the Italian campaigns, does it serve as fodder for riddles, charades, epigrams, concetti and madrigals. No longer is it merely a pretext for clever wordplay, when lovers feared no rigours save those of their Lady. For then its expression was unfettered, amidst the convulsions and chaos of the State and the indifference of public opinion, occupied elsewhere. How serene the ease with which good Amadis Jamyn and even the excellent Abbé Desportes, to gratify His Most Christian Majesty, Henry of France and Poland, third of his name, resurrect the ancient verses of alternating Love and "Petrarchise" indiscriminately in honour of fair ladies and Court favourites alike. Love is a domestic cat at liberty: constraint renders it savage. It will roar in captivity come the next century, when Corneille bridles it with Duty and Racine with propriety. The materialist eighteenth century returns its freedom and the lamb's gentleness, yet it grows weary and melancholy invades its heart. It passes its days stifling yawns and now consumption has taken hold. After the revolutionary bacchanal, restored Order chains it up again. The howling resumes, mingled with tears and nostalgic sighs, tightening or loosening with the turn of the screw. Exaltation gives way to fits of spleen and dejection. Enter the tormented procession of dark romantic lovers, sons of Werther and Lara. Here come René, Adolphe, Rolla, Antony, who like spiteful children amuse themselves with inflicting pain. The shadows through which they wander receive strange sighs. They know not what they want. Some whisper mysterious words they scarcely dare entrust to the wind. Others intoxicate themselves with hollow, resounding declarations. They flee their heart's desire or, should they embrace it, yearn for something else. They suffer simultaneously from doubt and mystical ardour. Goethe, arms flung wide to heaven, awaits infinity's embrace. He dreams himself a Ganymede, borne by supernatural force through space where he burns:

Umfangend umfangen! Aufwärts an deinen Busen
[Embracing, embraced, upward to thy breast!]

Byron, powerless to contain his too-vast heart's pounding, can no longer remain still and exiles himself in pursuit of some sacred cause demanding sacrifice. Following his lead, Keats, Shelley, Platen seek from shore to shore some relief for their anguish. All of them, sickened by flatness and ennui, minds teeming with visions and vapours, set forth:

Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau.
[To the unknown's depths in search of something new.]

They return perpetually to the shores of that azure sea where Venus was born, hoping to encounter the ideal that haunts them. A dazzling spectre beckons from afar and vanishes at their approach. Swinburne watches it dissolve into the waves: "What strange god has adorned you with all the world's seductions, O creature of the barren hours?" To this same image Théophile Gautier offers incense:

Chimère ardente, effort suprême
De l'Art et de la Volupté,
Monstre charmant, comme je t'aime,
Avec ta multiple beauté!

[Burning chimera, supreme achievement
Of Art and Sensuality,
Enchanting monster, how I love you
With your manifold beauty!]

It's the monster born, as Albert Samain puts it:

Au ciel supérieur des formes plus subtiles.
[In the higher heaven of subtler forms.]

Bearing the reflection of:

L'ardent soleil païen qui l'a fait naître un jour
De ton écume d'or, ô Beauté suraiguë!

[The burning pagan sun that birthed it from
Your golden foam, O Beauty most acute!]

It's "the Eros of frail and sacred androgyne form" that haunts Tinan's nights; the Parsifal accompanied by Wagner's triumphant fanfares. It's some indefinable gleaming brow of a Valkyrie or helmeted maiden—an unwitting Siegfried or Joan of Arc. It's mystery's herald, the impenetrable Archangel glimpsed at heaven's open threshold. Some soar towards it like Icarus towards the sun, risking his fate of shattered wings. "I cannot reach the ideal, yet cannot return to the real," declares Jules Tellier, comparing himself to beetles overturned on their backs, struggling desperately without managing to right themselves, gazing in terror at the distant sky never meant for them. How has our fathers' innocent love, the love of pastoral romance, arrived at this tragic pass where it offers nothing but despair?

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Excessive civilisation, one might suppose. Overwrought minds have lost their bearings. A derangement of sensibilities. Symptom of imminent dissolution. The overripe fruit trembles on the branch. Yet others, like the Genevan scholar M. Camille Spiess, discern in this the glimmer of a new dawn. They see nothing here but the fertile distress of labour pains, a beneficial crisis of metamorphosis. M. Camille Spiess, who began with the histology of the leech's digestive tract and arrived at a biological conception of the soul, has absorbed the teachings of Gobineau and Nietzsche. From his masters he's acquired a taste for audacious speculation. Like them, he endeavours to recalibrate the scale of values and extract the essential features of the "superman." He troubles himself no longer with race, as did Gobineau, nor solely with the virtues of resolution, as did Nietzsche. He concerns himself exclusively with sexual inclinations. Now, following his exposition and research into experimental pathogenesis, here are the reflections he prompts in us:

Humanity, having emerged from its primitive larval state, has achieved self-consciousness only after countless transformations, with many more to traverse before fulfilling its destiny and attaining perfection. Age upon age, degree by degree, through successive generations that are but rough drafts, an accomplished type of new human continues to gestate in our very marrow. Above the common man and woman, mere reproductive animals, there strives to arise a Being of loftier purpose, embodying the couple's virtues refined and spiritualised to their supreme expression. Towards this ultimate aristocracy of humanity the Symbolist poets advance, even whilst imagining they merely indulge, through dilettantism, in some decadent fantasy. They're not retreating into the past. They're anticipating the future. The world marvels, and they themselves marvel perhaps still more at these reflexes that compel them constantly to turn their gaze towards the mists of antiquity:

Où rêvent, fraternels, les éphèbes antiques
Et Narcisse au grand cœur qui mourut de s'aimer.

[Where dream in brotherhood the ancient youths
And great-souled Narcissus who died of self-love.]

They themselves can scarcely explain this compulsion to reopen:

L'Ere auguste des dieux et des amours bizarres,
[The august Age of gods and strange desires,]

"Strange"—there's the disavowal they think it prudent to impose upon themselves. Others parade the satanic pride of the damned, approaching with a kind of exasperation, defiance, bravado that merely reinforces surrounding prejudices and their own disgrace. They concede the perversity of their leanings. "I have a passion for line that reaches depravity," writes Jean de Tinan. How many of his contemporaries might say the same, and though Baudelaire proclaims:

Que la beauté du corps est un sublime don
Qui de toute infamie arrache le pardon

[That beauty of the body is a sublime gift
That wrests forgiveness from all infamy]

they seem hardly convinced and breathe uneasily outside the well-worn paths. In the chorus of confused voices resonating within them, where ancestry and posterity intermingle as in all living creatures, they cannot distinguish past from future. This Narcissus they take for an ancient legacy is "tomorrow's gift"; his kiss belongs to the future. Far from diminishing them,

Cette soif d'infini dont leurs grands cœurs sont pleins
[This thirst for the infinite that fills their mighty hearts]

testifies to their noble lineage. They grope through darkness, having failed to recognise the force that drives them to "cast off nature's heavy chains." This force is Plato's Eros, which shares nothing with carnal Eros, and in which passion burns above desire. It's the virile, disinterested affection Walt Whitman glimpsed and boldly invokes, born as he was in a young land unencumbered by routine and

false creases. It's this love liberated from sexual shame that Nietzsche hailed when declaring: "We wish to live above the impure like strong winds, neighbours to eagles, snow and sun."

Thus speaks M. Camille Spiess, or at least thus he furnishes us material to speak, for were I to follow him literally rather than interpret freely, I should feel only contempt for the Symbolist poets, whom he finds excessively clouded with Judeo-Christian vapours. Because they've failed to answer the particular Ideal that, in his view, beckoned them, M. Camille Spiess harshly condemns their blindness or timidity. He charges them with dereliction. He brands them degenerates and much else besides. Yet M. Camille Spiess, like all Nietzsche's disciples, belongs to that breed who fly into rage the instant they detect the faintest whiff of catechism. Sins! Remorse! Contrition! "Marks of intellectual bondage," "death-rattles of the impotent and defeated," "fools' ravings." How easily said! But surely we must reach some understanding. I'm perfectly willing to think Beyond Good and Evil, but if we're to unite in chastity regardless, why quarrel over the means? "Christianity," says Nietzsche, "with its deep resentment against life, has made sexuality something unclean. It casts filth upon the beginning, upon our life's first condition." Splendid—and I'd understand this from the mouth of some zealot determined to "live his life" at any cost, following his thunderous inclinations despite laws and constables. But what can this protest mean coming from Nietzsche, who leads us straight back to asceticism and prescribes abstinence with iron discipline? What peculiar paradox! You urge me to unfurl every sail, to realise myself in the fullness of my basest instincts, to charge headlong through all obstacles; you cry as watchword: total, absolute freedom! complete licence!—only to rein me in at the first stirring with Seneca's bit:

Imperare sibi maximum imperium est.
[To rule oneself is the supreme dominion.]

"Master your passions, render them obedient"—but Christianity, though it didn't invent the formula, has never preached otherwise. The Symbolist poets, for having failed to weave with steady, decisive hand the apotheosis of the Neuter, may therefore bear M. Camille Spiess's censure with equanimity. They possess, moreover, as consolation, the certificate of genius he inadvertently bestows when, after citing Nietzsche's words:

"The finest author is one ashamed of being a man of letters. What good is a book that cannot transport us beyond all books? Write with your blood and you'll learn that blood is spirit."

He adds:

"Creative genius is the tragic man, the hermetic poet who delivers to the world the living book, the message entrusted to him, inscribed in his entire being."

The standard-bearers of the Symbolist movement—Baudelaire, Verlaine, Laforgue, Samain—like all poets worthy of the name, have done nothing else.

Esoteric Symbolism

In the eighteenth century, all France, seized by a fit of mawkish sentiment, took to weeping alongside Rousseau and his minor poets, those manufacturers of idylls. In the nineteenth century, gripped by an attack of neurasthenia, she begins to wail with Chateaubriand and the Romantics. René's melancholy would grow more acrid in his successors, his misanthropy more combative. His complaint swells by degrees, becomes rebellion in Vigny, despair in Musset, fury in Baudelaire, and culminates, with Léon Bloy, in a kind of imprecatory frenzy—I nearly wrote, in a genuine fit of delirium tremens. This is the same Léon Bloy who signed himself Caïn Marchenoir, and whom Barbey d'Aurevilly dubbed "a cathedral gargoyle spewing heaven's rain upon the righteous and the wicked alike". How true it is that social upheavals spawn epidemics of nervous affliction. This springs from a sudden tear in the fabric. Voltaire's France suffered from the amputation of her faith as the young Republican France suffered from the amputation of her kings. A void demands filling. Too abrupt a liberation leaves minds adrift. One thinks of the morphine addict suddenly deprived of his essential drug. The freed slave doesn't acquire the sentiments of a free man overnight. Freedom becomes a burden. A new apprenticeship must be undertaken. I cannot say whether, as some maintain, man is born a subject and craves a master, but watching what unfolds, one might well believe that man, born religious, will never rid himself of idols. He razes altars only to raise new ones. Whence this hunger for the marvellous, this ineradicable fetishism of the heart? Atheism is an empty word. Those who profess it still worship some entity: Art, Science, the Fatherland, Love. A need for devotion and sacrifice seems to warn us that our whole destiny is not played out here below and that there remains for us, on earth, something beyond mere physical gratification to conquer. Even paganism knew the bitterness that rises from fonte leporum[tn19]. The frequency of suicide amidst wealth and pleasure stands as manifest proof of this truth. A thirst for the Beyond persists despite all, and whichever way we turn, we collide with Mystery —that mystery which most symbolists, after Maeterlinck's fashion, have made their particular domain and wherein they discovered the revelation of the "quotidian tragic". When one listens to the heavens, says Hugo, one believes one hears someone walking. However we may wish to slumber upon the pillow of soft tranquillity, doubt returns more harrowing than ever, and whoever has attempted refuge in indifference, if he merits the name of man, finds himself murmuring with Musset: "I cannot... despite myself, the infinite torments me."

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Minds churn in their quest to recover lost security and equilibrium. We seek escape from black uncertainty, from the nightmare of the present. Yet whilst the majority glimpses its golden age through future's haze, a select few pin their hopes for salvation solely upon return to the past. These latter, for all their efforts, have breathed the contagious air of the age. Something irreparable—the fissure in crystal—has fractured ancient certainties. The champions of throne and altar appear less as convinced apostles of their faith than as interested advocates in a sensational cause. From the Restoration

onwards, their loyalism sours. They turn from the corpulent, pragmatic, gouty Louis XVIII to embrace the adventurer Naundorff. Here, at least, is a picturesque figure. Mystery crowns him with its halo; imagination circles him like a moth. Consider it! A prince dethroned, disowned by his blood, exiled, hunted, held up to mockery, who drifts through his good city of Paris like a pariah, whom penury compels to bed down beneath bridges. What romantic theatre! Here lies matter for pathetic orations and rhetorical flourishes! Here is wherewith to rouse hearts and convulse souls! Recall that tale by Villiers: Jules Favre, commanded by Bismarck to seal the capitulation treaty of 1870, who begs pardon, having at hand, lacking the official seal, only the signet ring upon his finger: "Let that suffice, then!" growls the Iron Chancellor impatiently. "Sign!" And Jules Favre complies. Uncanny coincidence! This ring, bearing the fleur-de-lis, came to him from Naundorff's son, whose cause he had pleaded and who possessed no other means of payment.

Thus the Bourbon seal, the royal arms of Louis XVII, consecrates our defeat, as though God had selected this instrument to inspire atheist and regicidal France towards salutary repentance and to exact atonement for her crimes and follies. Such, at any rate, is the thesis Villiers advances.

This son of Naundorff finds himself reduced to hawking wines for his bread. This fallen pretender receives homage from his last faithful amidst the rubble of a squalid suburb[16]. This heir to a hundred kings must periodically wrench himself from genuflections, hand-kissings, from the etiquette of Versailles transplanted to a tavern's back room, to come with sleeves rolled up and serve the dubious clientele—streetwalkers and loungers in carpet slippers—their twelve-sou litre. This adventure, both tragic and absurd, offers the makings of Shakespearean drama, of a novel sprung from Balzac's imagination. It will kindle the avenging wit of a Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, unleash the thunderous bombast and furious invective of a Léon Bloy. Yet I fear there lurks in these men merely a craving for originality and the urge to distinguish themselves from the herd—or as they would say, from the imbeciles. Though they preserve for Marie-Antoinette, sanctified through suffering, a kind of sacred reverence, though they lament the martyr-king's fate, can we not question their sincerity when we read from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's pen: "Even dead kings possess a sometimes thoroughly disdainful manner of chastising the buffoons who dare award themselves the hypocritical pleasure of pitying them"? True, living kings may likewise invoke Providence's aid in their defence. The anonymous bullet that felled the pamphleteer Paul-Louis Courier, seemingly avenging the crowned usurper's libels, might have furnished the same Villiers matter to exercise his disconcerting irony.

These intransigent legitimists strike me as being as uncomfortable and displaced in their convictions and grandiloquent declarations as parvenus amidst the heraldic splendour of palaces acquired with ready money. These same men would restore us to ancestral faith, blind to their loss of Christian humility and Scripture's true import. They appropriate like a megaphone the eloquence of the Church Fathers, yet in infiltrating their doctrine, they remind me of that operetta character who, having squeezed into a paladin's oversized armour, thinks to terrorise us by working its creaking machinery. Their ferocious, violent, extravagant Catholicism positively stinks of heresy, and had they lived in the days of Popes Farnese and Ghislieri[tn20], it would have been imprudent to send them wandering near the Holy Office. The Church, moreover, has disowned them. The earliest of these recusants, Lamennais, felt Gregory XVI's thunderbolts. One alone received pontifical blessing (and that before the letter): Roselly de Lorgues, commissioned by Pius IX to write Christopher Columbus's history with an eye to canonisation. But which other of our militant Catholics would have found favour before an ecclesiastical tribunal?

Not Raymond Brucker, that forgotten novelist who enjoyed a vogue between 1830 and 1850, and who enlisted in faith's service a street-corner eloquence, a vulgar patois at which any council would have taken rightful offence. His conversion story bears telling. This utopian, who had professed the doctrines of Saint-Simon and Fourier and had successively embraced all the fantastical creeds sprouting like mushrooms from the ancient faith's ruins, chances one day to hear the celebrated Father de Ravignan preach. Straightaway he resolves to seek him out and demonstrate his errors! The Jesuit receives him without ceremony, but at the first objections: "First make your confession!" he commands imperiously. The other obeys. As he kneels, grace works its will. He emerges transformed from this encounter. Behold him ablaze with apostolic zeal. He recruits faubourg workers, stands them drinks and sermonises them across the bar, glass in hand. His homilies sparkle with sacraments and carter's oaths. He has borrowed his doctrine from the Church but not her reverence, nor the blooms of elegant speech. "When a man beloved of God," he enjoyed saying of himself, "strays from the righteous path, God boots him back with mighty kicks to the backside."

Neither could Louis Veuillot have secured ecumenical favour, though he mounted guard at the Church's portals like a Swiss Guard "to keep the dogs out". Nor the satanic Baudelaire, nor yet Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, whom the Church would once have burnt for sorcery, still less the neurotic Huysmans, that chronicler of black masses, or Léon Bloy the vociferous. Not even Henri Lasserre. This publicist, who trumpeted Lourdes[tn21] where he had recovered his sight and proclaimed its miracles, had undertaken to translate the Gospels. Encouraged by his diocesan clergy, he sought Rome's endorsement. He believed himself credentialled by the two hundred editions of his Histoire de Lourdes. Ill-starred venture: the Index condemned his book and ordered it pulped.

How might the Church have welcomed Joséphin Péladan, who claimed descent from the Magi and who, with his astrakhan mane, his crimped beard, his papal mandates and Assyrian phraseology, delighted in playing mystifier to the masses? She repudiated even Ernest Hello, that genius punctuated by platitudes, as Léon Bloy put it.

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Born at Lorient on 4 November 1828, Ernest Hello, son of a counsellor to the Court of Cassation, might have stepped straight from one of Hoffmann's fantastic tales, with his flowing locks and outlandish ways. Small of stature, stooped, his eyes a keen, pale steel-blue, this Breton lived in seclusion with his wife on his estate at Kéroman, where he died on 14 July 1885—at the very moment when Symbolism, which partly derives from him, was bursting into bloom. He seemed to have turned his back on the world, nourishing himself, like some anchorite of old, on ecstasy, solitude and silence. Each morning, after hearing mass at seven and receiving communion, he would withdraw to the furthest reaches of his tree-shadowed park, to a pavilion that looked out upon the ocean. Here, remote from the clamour and futile agitation of mankind, he awaited the coming of God and His visible kingdom. He awaited it with perfect confidence. He was utterly certain. "The very thought of dying beforehand revolted him as an injustice, so profoundly had he conceived, in an abyss of prayer, his assurance of being creditor to this event" (Léon Bloy). Here, with the wind and sea for company, his spirit resonating with mighty organ-music, he rendered into French Dionysius the Areopagite, who lays down the laws of mystical theology, and John of Ruysbroeck the Admirable, who puts them into practice. Here he transcribed the revelations that Angela of Foligno dictated to her confessor, Brother

Arnaud of the Franciscan Order. Angela had witnessed Christ's Passion in a vision. "All that is spoken of this passion," she would say, "all that is recounted amounts to nothing beside what my soul has seen." Here too Ernest Hello endeavoured to impose order upon the apocalyptic vagaries of Jeanne Chézard de Matel. Here he composed his Physionomie des Saints and hurled anathemas at Renan and Voltaire. In chronicling Renan's career, he seeks to demonstrate the depths of ignorance a scholar may plumb, and of credulity an unbeliever. "The perils of ignorance and credulity," he declares, "are graver than we imagine. They merit our attention." Of Voltaire he writes: "His stance towards Christianity is unambiguous. His blindness is total. His is the serenity born of absolute stupidity. Perceiving nothing, he escapes even unease. Moreover, his heart abets his mind. Voltaire, to sum him up in passing, is a filthy imbecile[17]." Like Pascal, Ernest Hello would recall us to our nothingness and humble our pride—yet this satanic sin of pride he denounces in others has, all unawares, taken root in himself, and he stands as a splendid specimen of contemporary vanity. If he inveighs so furiously against "the mediocre man," it is because mediocrity is genius's mortal enemy. His own genius, naturally—for Hello cannot bear being overlooked[18].

And yet the unbelievers of his day are not simply motivated by deliberate religious indifference, as Hello appears to suppose; perhaps they burn with a zeal as fierce as his own, only channelled towards different ends. These unbelievers are, in truth, apostles of a new faith. They too claim to feel the breath of infinity upon them, but they have done with the tribal God of the Jews, the circumscribed God of Christian Scripture. Science has dispersed the clouds that veiled a heaven our ignorance had made into a ceiling. It has thrown open the boundless chasm of the cosmos. They know the earth no longer holds the centre of the universe, as Scripture erroneously maintained. Countless worlds, teeming with life like our own, wheel through space, drawn by a mysterious force mightier than the Biblical Jehovah, who remains confined to our narrow horizon. For Charles Morice, this God represents "the door barred against the Beyond." He is not the universal God these new seekers pursue.

The Church regards poets with suspicion, seeing them as rebels. The poets, for their part, spurn its intolerant guardianship, its apparatus of cautious checks and constraints. Charles Morice has catalogued their complaints in *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*. The poets of 1885 refuse to let its curses or funereal liturgy cast shadows over their exultation. Wagner has proclaimed that Art's great synthesis is "the joyous Dream of beautiful truth." Now that poets have discovered their true country in Wagner's formula, melancholy has had its day—and really, the contemporary Church is lamentably bereft of aesthetic sensibility. "Christian Art perished the day a pope saw fit to drape the nudes in Michelangelo's Last Judgement." So says Charles Morice, who cannot stomach the tawdry imagery and papier-mâché divinities of Saint-Sulpice devotional art.

He writes: "Why must the glorious basilicas of the Middle Ages be defiled by Sacred Hearts fit for butchers' shop signs and Madonnas that rival the waxworks in hairdressers' windows?" And again: "Why is Catholic literature worthless—worse than worthless, positively repellent even to the most tolerant? Why, when some genuine talent attempts to rekindle the inspiration that once drew artists as to their rightful home, does official Catholicism thrust him away—loudly if he's Barbey d'Aurevilly, furtively if he's Paul Verlaine? Can this truly be the Church that in medieval times sheltered literature, all the arts, all philosophies in its sanctuary?" Morice's verdict: "No, this is no longer that Church; the Christian wellsprings where we once slaked our thirst for the absolute have run dry."

Meanwhile, Édouard Schuré, another idealist poet-philosopher, explains his own break with the Church. It has dozed off along the road. Since going Roman, the Church has worked to petrify minds rather than guide them towards discovery. Against the contemporary Church's wilful stagnation, Schuré sets Saint Thomas's words: "Faith is the courage of the spirit that springs forward, confident of finding truth." Like Charles Morice, he believes the age of revelation has not ended and that poets alone possess the gift of hearing and interpreting Mystery's voices. Thus those who find no satisfaction in official science's materialist conclusions must pursue truth beyond the Church's walls. They set forth into uncharted territory. The opening stages are invariably arduous. One courts disaster. Snares and briars multiply. Feet bleed. Hands tear. Sight fails. Some falter at the first reverse and retreat, as to a makeshift refuge, into clerical agnosticism. "That means purchasing peace of mind," says Édouard Schuré, "at the cost of surrender." And what value has this pragmatic faith that would have scandalised the first Apostles and Church Fathers, that lacks even the nerve to declare: credo, quia absurdum![tn22]

The rest press on, navigating by starlight, trusting either to pure intuition or to the occult sciences. Sorcery resurfaces. Having ceased to believe in God, not everyone has ceased believing in the devil. We recall how the Duke of Orleans, later Regent, and his daughter, the Duchess of Berry, both professed free-thinkers, kept company with sorcerers and necromancers, consulted tarot cards, and thought nothing of venturing into the Montrouge quarries by night to invoke Satan. In their footsteps, many contemporaries meddle with hexes and incantations. Superstition sets tables spinning—and heads as well. Spirits are conjured. In countless garrets and fifth-floor student lodgings, initiates convene for arcane rites, intoning spells and ritual verses of enchantment. The concierge's commandeered cat serves as demonic familiar in these cabalistic ceremonies. Yet beneath all this tomfoolery and puerility, a genuine movement is crystallising. Breaking free from the wagons of mountebanks, clairvoyant somnambulists, palm-readers and spiritualist parlours, occultism prepares to flower anew under scientific scrutiny. "The natural philosophy that guided the alchemists," observes Berthelot, "rests upon the hypothesis of matter's essential unity; it remains as defensible, at bottom, as our most esteemed modern theories. Current scientific thinking about matter's constitution bears distinct resemblances to the profound insights of the earliest alchemists." An elite prepares itself for the work ahead. Stanislas de Guaita will lend his hand.

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Stanislas de Guaita, born in 1861 at the Château d'Alteville in the Dieuze country, was a fair-haired son of Lorraine. Sprung from an ancient noble house of Germanic origin that had come to Italy in Charlemagne's wake and turned French under the First Empire, he bore within him a long inheritance of restless spirits, fevers, ethereal visions and sluggish blood. Before age made him stout and puffed him up with flesh, he presented the picture of an amiable youth, his lithe form displayed in well-cut suits. His diverse ancestry revealed itself in a physiognomy at once dreamy and resolute. Pale-complexioned, his sensual lip shadowed by a fine golden down, he turned upon life an astonished gaze that lymph kept moist and veiled with melancholy.

He was educated at the Nancy lycée, where Maurice Barrès was his fellow pupil. Beneath literature's mantle they formed one of those steadfast friendships that only death can undo. They called on one another during holidays. The author of *Les Déracinés* has painted for us those hours of faith and fervour spent at his friend's home in the Lorraine countryside. He has evoked Guaita's study, the table

buckling under its freight of books, their summer evenings with windows thrown open to a star-studded sky rent by heat lightning.

Above all, the pair found their rapture in Baudelaire—and here we touch upon the spell cast by the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* over youthful imaginations. "How often," Barrès writes, "we recited 'L'Invitation au voyage' to one another! It struck us like a gypsy fiddler's bow, a rush of perfumes that turned our hearts upside down and found the raw nerve of our souls." Alongside Baudelaire, the two friends "discovered tobacco, coffee, and all that befits young men[19]." They devoured books feverishly till the small hours; but whilst Barrès, drained by this prolonged succession of lyrical incantations and succumbing to exhaustion, sought to restore his powers through sleep, Stanislas de Guaita, "blessed with iron health which he squandered freely, would venture out to watch the mists lift from the hills surrounding Nancy, and having roused nature herself, would return to rouse his companion, declaiming verses of his own making or some celebrated piece stumbled upon in his nocturnal reading." Come November 1882, both decamped to Paris to complete their education, without forsaking a jot of their literary aspirations.

An opposing tide would carry them off. Stanislas de Guaita brought out two verse collections with Lemerre: *La Muse Noire* (1883) and *Rosa Mystica* (1885)—green efforts, clumsy in execution, where thought never quite shook free of Baudelaire's stamp. But he would not persist in this vein. When Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême* came his way, it unveiled his true calling. The daemon of occultism had him in its grip. Venturing into this domain, he discovered a science in utter disarray. The authentic tradition had fractured at the close of the eighteenth century amid the schisms and feuds of Martinists and Jacobins. Contemporary academic orthodoxy and the positivist onslaught appeared to have administered the coup de grâce. What survived of the doctrine must not stray into empiricist hands. Most pressing was the need to restore the canonical texts, to establish a conservatory—or rather, a Collège de France for occultism. Guaita rallied the devotees who gathered round him and set them to studying the hermetic masters. Thus came into being the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose-Cross, complete with its aspirants, its grades, its three chambers, its supreme council. Stanislas was chosen as Grand Master.

Utterly absorbed in his mission of restoration and dissemination, he built up an occultist library. The Chacornac publishing house reissued ancient texts, brought out French translations of venerable alchemical treatises, returned to circulation the works of Paracelsus, Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Raymond Lull, Arnauld de Villeneuve. Meanwhile Péladan pressed on with his Éthopée, the poet Édouard Schuré traced the outline of that secret history of religions which would emerge in 1889 as *Les Grands Initiés*, and Huysmans renounced the realist creed, turning back to God where he luxuriated —out of sheer disgust with the commonplace—as in some rare vocable or singular notion, whilst sketching out *Là-bas*. For his part, Stanislas de Guaita stockpiled materials for his projected history of the Accursed Sciences. Let none take fright—he invokes Khunrath's warrant: Non scientia malis sed usus damnat.[tn23]

In his ground-floor lodgings on the Avenue Trudaine, low-ceilinged and gloomy, he dwelt in solitude, curtains drawn against daylight, absorbed in fathoming the mysteries of the spagyric[tn24] art. He embodied the Gnostic maxim: Lege, lege, lege et relege, labora et invenies[tn25]. He toiled and grew wan over ancient grimoires, blackened parchments, dust-laden folios riddled with cryptographic symbols and pentacles. His rooms were rumoured to be haunted, which delighted him no end. A woman had

met her mysterious death there at the hands of the bonesetter who had lodged there before. She returned as a spectre. Her phantom drifted through the furniture, along the walls.

Thursday evenings, Guaita emerged from his hermitage and welcomed his circle. Poets rubbed shoulders with initiates. They congregated round the tea table as alchemists of old had gathered round Athanor and Aludel[tn26]. There one met the whole fellowship of gnosis: Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, Jules Lermina, Dr Encausse, Abbé Rocca, Joséphin Péladan, Lady Caithness—in whom Mary Stuart's spirit had taken up residence and who, Laurent Tailhade tells us, "railed endlessly against her sister Elizabeth and would unspool, for any willing ear, her execution, the scaffold at Fotheringay." One also encountered Paul Adam, the poet Albert Jounet, author of *Les Lys noirs*—for all runs to black amongst these apostles of illumination—Édouard Dubus, Victor-Émile Michelet... Here they pored over the teachings of masters and patriarchs: Apollonius of Tyana, Nicolas Flamel, Swedenborg, the Emerald Tablet[tn27], the Clavicula[tn28], the Treasure of Treasures[tn29]. Here, in the thick of Montmartre's carnival atmosphere, a stone's throw from the Moulin-Rouge where Grille-d'Égout, La Goulue and Valentin-le-Désossé held court, their high kicks amply satisfying the crowd's aesthetic appetites, a chosen band of ardent souls laboured to recover the wellsprings of enlightenment and grasp the bough of primordial wisdom. And as though the world had suddenly retreated by millennia, the voice of Hermes Trismegistus[tn30] rang out, fresh as at creation's dawn:

"I speak truth. All is in all. All springs from one. Its father is the sun. Its mother the moon. The wind has borne it in its womb. Earth is its nurse. This is the universe's Thelema. You who hear me, sever earth from fire, spirit from matter. You shall banish darkness and all the world's glory shall be yours."

Guaita broke off his winter meditations in Paris only to take them up again at his secluded domain of Alteville, where he passed the fair season "in the loneliest corner of German Lorraine, amid the sweeping vistas of the Lindre pond." There he lived beneath lowering skies and changeless horizons, wrapped in the mystery of an oak forest and walled park, where only the peacocks' harsh cries troubled the silence.

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In *Le Serpent de la Genèse*, a work structured in three septains, Stanislas de Guaita explores the drama of mankind's original fall. He aspired to unveil before the world—to inspire its horror and secure its deliverance once and for all—the phantom of evil in its terrible nakedness. But theoretical exposition alone would not satisfy him. He insisted on wedding it to indispensable practice, convinced as he was that if tradition forms one pillar of the esoteric temple, experience must surely form the other. Granted, experience alone may well destroy the reckless adventurer into the arcane; yet transmitted knowledge equally remains a dead letter without it. And so he too set forth in pursuit of the Golden Fleece. He too would scale the heavens. Dismissing the warnings contained both in the Hebrew myth of Babel's tower and the Greek tale of the Titans' defeat, he surrendered to the folly of attempting the impossible once more.

"The crowning achievement of initiation," declares Guaita, "lies in the Art of becoming a genius by artificial means." Through this art, one may command inspiration and commune at will with the great Unknown. Occultism is the instrument of mankind's highest faculties, the synthesis of all

sciences and the key to every mystery. It offers man the means to extend infinitely the bounds of consciousness and perception, to slip the chains of space and time, and to realise himself in unity through identification with the Divine. This operation is accomplished through ecstasy. Such ecstatic clairvoyance comes unbidden to certain privileged natures. It is the hallmark of genius. We say then that God descends to man and visits His creature, but the Magus seeks to ascend to God at his pleasure and install himself in divine intimacy. This faculty can be acquired only through sanctity. The road is long and arduous. The impatient turn to narcotics to shed their fleshly fetters by artificial means. To morphine and opium they look for passport and return passage on this voyage through infinity. The temptation proves irresistible. Stanislas de Guaita could not withstand it. He was not even permitted to complete his work, nor to deliver his ultimate revelations. The Astral suffers no violation by profane hands. The shadow has kept its secret. Ecstasy cannot be bought. It must be earned. His fate has not discouraged others. True, not all trust to toxins or employ them to burglarise the arcane. Occultism continues to enthral the mind. Every Symbolist draws from it in some measure. Charles Morice, who would be their standard-bearer, writes: "The occult sciences constitute one of Art's principal foundations. Every true poet is an initiate by nature. The reading of grimoires awakens in him secrets whose virtual knowledge he has always possessed." He might have added, by way of example, that the greatest poetic geniuses known to humanity—Lucretius, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe—were all initiates of the gnosis[20].

A Small Esoteric Review

Psyché, a monthly review of art and literature, boasted Victor-Émile Michelet as editor-in-chief and Augustin Chaboseau as editorial secretary (editorial offices: 12, rue de Vaugirard; administration: 29, rue de Trévise). First issue: November 1891. The journal wore its unpunctuality as a badge of honour—so much so that a notice to readers in the sixth issue announced: "From the next issue onwards, *Psyché* proposes to astonish her indulgent readers greatly by appearing with something resembling regular periodicity. Nevertheless, to preserve a certain delightful unpredictability—may she be forgiven in view of her feminine title!—she might occasionally make herself not so much desired (she harbours no such coquettish ambitions) as simply awaited." I rather suspect she kept everyone waiting indefinitely after the seventh issue (December 1892). The contents pages bore the names of Victor-Émile Michelet, Augustin Chaboseau, Albert Jhouney, Léon Bazalgette, Henry de Braisne, Jules Bois, Narcisse Quellien, and Joachim Gasquet.

The foreword declares: "What *Psyché* aspires to be is shown by her frontispiece design: Astride the winged bull, she journeys from the mysteries of antiquity to those of modernity, towards the Seine's island chosen to house the prophetic 'Ark of Isis'.

"*Psyché* shall be spiritualist and, above all, synthetic—devoted to the harmonious blending of all elements that constitute life. For the life of an artwork encompasses the same elements as human life. To whom does she speak? To some lofty elite of initiates? No—to all whose intelligence and sensibility remain uncorrupted by artificial education."

Psyché heralded the imminent publication of Éliphas Lévi's *Catéchisme de la paix* and the *Zohar*, one of the Kabbalah's foundational texts, translated into French for the first time.

The review also directed readers to Papus's journal *L'Initiation*, headquartered at 14, rue de Strasbourg, Paris, with Georges Montière as editor-in-chief. In *Psyché*'s second issue, Léon Bazalgette explored what constitutes the mage. He observed that whilst the religious ideal of the masses wanes, that of the elite intensifies and ascends, as though preserving for the inevitable new faith the treasury of tradition. His roster of archetypal mages includes Plato, Pythagoras, Socrates, Carlyle, and Emerson. With Epictetus, the ideal diminishes whilst remaining exalted. Bazalgette shares Carlyle's conviction that heaven's most precious gift to earth is the soul of a genuinely heaven-sent man bearing a message for humanity. This figure is the "Hero"—one who hears the inner soul of things singing, who guides us to infinity's edge and grants us moments to gaze into its depths. In Emerson's vision, the hero becomes humanity's representative, the divine exemplar upon whose truth the world depends—the one who plants humanity's standard several leagues beyond the chaos. Victor Hugo, too, essayed the Mage's portrait, envisioning him as a seer of the celestial heights who leans trembling over the abyss of vertigo or braces himself against the crumbling precipice of the unfathomable.

Oh! vous êtes les seuls pontifes,
Penseurs, lutteurs des grands espoirs,
Dompteurs des fauves hippogriffes,
Cavaliers des Pégases noirs!
Âmes, devant Dieu, toutes nues,
Voyants des choses inconnues,
Vous savez la religion!

[Oh! you alone are the pontiffs,
Thinkers, warriors of great hopes,
Tamers of savage hippogriffs,
Riders of black Pegasuses!
Souls laid bare before God,
Seers of the unknown,
You possess true religion!]

In his poem *Les Mages*, Victor Hugo summons forth all those in whom divinity concentrates, all the fertile minds:

Génie! Ô tiare de l'ombre!
Pontificat de l'infini!

[Genius! O shadow's tiara!
Pontificate of the infinite!]

All the great pathfinders, all the divinely inspired:

Ó figures dont la prunelle
Est la vitre de l'idéal

[O figures whose eyes
Are windows onto the ideal]

The wan dream-faces, the apostles, the wild-haired poets, nature's priests, the pale contemplatives—all who thirst for infinity are mages who have uncovered "nature's hidden meaning".

Conduit par les hommes d'extase,
Le genre humain marche en avant.

[Led by men of ecstasy,
Humanity advances.]

Bazalgette concludes by adopting Joséphin Péladan's abstract conception of the Pythagorean mage: "The supreme cultivation, the synthesis that presupposes every analysis, the highest achievement born of hypothesis wedded to experience, the aristocracy of intellect and the crown jewel of science fused with art."

In its book reviews, *Psyché* singles out for special attention Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Henri Mazel's *La Fin des Dieux*, Rémy de Gourmont's *Lilith*, Robert Scheffer's *Ombres et Mirages*, and Bernard Lazare's *Le Miroir des légendes.*

On Papus's work on the Kabbalah, the review observes: "The Kabbalah resists vulgarisation. It represents the profoundest perception of Mystery, attainable only by minds capable of soaring flight. Yet we believe Papus quite right in maintaining that everything may be published, for only those meant to understand will do so. His book unlocks for students the door to Kabbalistic esotericism. The fundamental principles are expounded with that lucidity and precision characteristic of all the author's works. The manipulation of the Hebrew alphabet and its numerical permutations, the profound symbolism of the divine names, and the sublime theory of the Sephiroth are elucidated with remarkable penetration and clarity."

Psyché reviews Péladan's Comment on devient mage: "The author has not created a work of scientific occultism, regarding hermetic knowledge as mere erudition irrelevant to his method of auto-magification or human sublimation. What immediately strikes the reader is this method's parallelism with Catholic doctrine—parallelism, not identity, for the emphasis shifts from the animic to the intellectual plane: saint becomes mage, prayer becomes idea. Christian perfectionism gives way to Platonic asseye, a discipline of pride and training meant to awaken the disciple to true personality, armouring him in that power of 'ipseity' which becomes his adamantine protection. This magical asseye liberates and develops our nature's inherent gift, as the alchemist extracts gold from base matter. Thus man attains purity, nobility, authentic glory. 'Communion with the illustrious dead, contemplation of the testamentary books of magical power... the force of forces lies in adherence to the divine plan.'"

To catalogue every little review that sprouted during this fertile period would be impossible. I shall highlight just one: *L'Art littéraire*, initially a small illustrated monthly (1892-93) that reinvented itself in 1894. Though among the most obscure, it attracted contributors of the calibre of Stéphane Mallarmé, Rémy de Gourmont, Saint-Pol-Roux, and René Ghil. Here Alfred Jarry, future author of *Ubu Roi*, made his literary debut, publishing *Les Minutes de sable mémorial* and various whimsical pieces.

Its director, Louis Lormel, born in Paris in 1869 to an old Artesian family, would later publish with Sansot in 1908 a collection of prose poems, Tableaux d'âmes, which Maurice Barrès ranked

alongside Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit*. In 1907, Lormel would launch another review, *La Rénovation esthétique*. During this period, he was a ubiquitous presence in the avant-garde press, writing under both his own name and sundry pseudonyms.

Yet there remains one small review I cannot in good conscience omit: *Le Sagittaire*, which I founded in June 1900 with backing from the Romance poets and Verlaine's circle. We established our offices at Clerget's, 13 boulevard Montparnasse—an unlucky number that the superstitious Moréas interpreted as an ill omen. His forebodings proved justified: *Le Sagittaire* expired after fourteen turbulent months. Beyond the regular contributors—Albert Mérat, Eugène Ledrain, Narcisse Quellien, Théodore Maurer, Izambard, Jean Bourguignon, Cazals, Charles Houin, Jean Court, Léon Frapié, Paul Sébillot, Lucien Hubert, Léon Riotor, Paul Fleurot, Léon Maillard, Charles Saunier, and Poinsot—we published Rachilde, Francis Jammes, Charles Morice, Lionel des Rieux, Moréas, Maurice du Plessys, and Gustave Kahn. We brought out Aimé Passereau's *Joyeusetés*, along with unpublished pieces by Charles Cros and Paul Verlaine, Ernest Delahaye's fascinating revelations about Rimbaud (his schoolfellow at the Charleville lycée), supplementary notes to Verlaine's confessions by Delahaye and Cazals, and Achille Delaroche's studies on the Literary Schools, which created quite a sensation at the time.

The State of Parisian Society During the Symbolist Era

It bears examining in what milieu and atmosphere Symbolism pursued its quest for spiritual elevation.

I have before me the *Paris-Parisien* almanac for 1897, published by Ollendorff. Here is the handbook of good form, the oracle of fashion, the indispensable vade-mecum for anyone who prides themselves on being "with it" and "bang up to date". Within its pages lies everything one absolutely must see and know to cut a proper figure in society and shine to advantage in the best circles: addresses of the smartest tailors, exclusive perfume formulae (including one courtesy of M. Paul Bourget), the names of preachers and young ladies currently in vogue, the milliners and poets from whom it is de rigueur to purchase. So comprehensive is this encyclopaedia of chic that even the dogs merit inclusion. Celebrity dogs, no less, famous by the same happy accident as most people—namely, birth into a world of silver feeding bowls—they hobnob with luminaries of science, letters, the arts, the bar, finance, the nobility, and the boudoir. Let us praise them for deigning to share such billing. The roll call includes: "Schamyl", the Duchess d'Uzès's borzoi; "Sky", the Marquise de Massa's toy-terrier; "Cure-dents", the Duchess de Noailles's sheepdog, and so forth—some forty pampered pedigrees in all, quite enough to constitute a gleaming Academy. And what fuss surrounds their august personages! A boutique devoted to their toilette has opened in the Galerie d'Orléans at the Palais-Royal, whilst portrait painters register their names, clamouring for the singular honour of immortalising them. All this is richly entertaining. But the true glory is that this breviary for snobs aims not merely to instil proper manners—it aspires to implant proper principles. Beyond deportment and dress, it seeks to govern private thought and mould the conscience. Not content with peddling exclusive recipes for cuisine and scent, it would dispense wisdom itself, available for the modest sum of six francs, distilled into lapidary maxims. Gleaning these at random allows us to gauge the society of the day and discover what constituted, in elite eyes, the virtues of the "superman" in the year of our Lord 1897. Intellectual and moral superiority amounted to roughly this:

"Despise politics and worship the theatre. — Know, at least by sight and name, those who 'make the scene' in Paris. — Lunch and dine only at establishments of note. — Affect to have read everything. — Master all the gossip. — Cut the pages of books by authors who grace your table. — Dine out incessantly and attend Mass. — From exhibitions, retain only works by people one encounters socially. — Shun solemnity and take life as a jolly jape."

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What curious society, where knowing those who "make the scene" suffices to confer distinction! Surely then the mark of genius must be to make the scene oneself? And that's precisely what le Tout-Paris[tn31] sets about doing. Theatre-mad, the lot of them. Theatrical affectations have infected

everything. The age belongs to posturing and peacocking. Le Tout-Paris, freed from the nightmare of Ravachol[tn32] and his exterminated gang, deaf to the opening rumblings of the Dreyfus Affair, is bent on pleasure. Leading this vapid elite shines a president cast in its image. The ornamental M. Félix Faure[tn33] plays the sovereign, revives court ceremonial for his own glory, stamps his monogram on the Élysée locks, and spends what hours he can filch from festivities devising dress uniforms dripping with gold braid to dazzle the multitudes. M. Félix Faure radiates contentment. Incense wafts his way. How perfectly he strikes the note! France is in clover. Fortune beams upon her. Two guardian angels watch over her: M. Hanotaux[tn34] tends her diplomatic relations whilst Senator Bérenger[tn35] safeguards her morals. In Paris, M. Lépine[tn36] maintains street order and ensures the smooth passage of state processions. No small task. The Russian sailors have swept through, igniting frenzies of enthusiasm. The Tsar and Tsarina's visit drove crowds to delirium, set orchestras and brass bands thundering. They've barely departed when the King of Siam is announced. Cheers echo endlessly through the air. One cloud alone darkens the horizon: the Marseillaise. This anthem strikes altogether too plebeian a note for greeting royalty. How can one bellow about tyrants before such radiant majesties? The question exercises the government press: might we not at least adapt more suitable words? Why not resurrect Partant pour la Syrie[tn37] or Vive Henri IV[tn38], which so delighted our forebears? The protocol gentlemen mull it over, whilst certain tender souls propose that, out of respect for our crowned friends, we should scrape from our monuments and the Arc de Triomphe various suspect inscriptions, and beg us to veil the shocking nakedness of Rude's sculptural group[tn39], upon which decent, God-fearing eyes cannot gaze without crimson embarrassment...

From these controversies flooding the period's newspapers, one gathers that our leaders have steered us to some apex of our history. French thought—official thought, that is, for the genuine article continues to flow, though submerged and ignored—official thought, I say, has gone stagnant, adapting itself to the fashions of the day, and public morality shows the strain. Society's finest specimens, hungry for refined amusements, ape grand dukes on the town, discover gypsy violinists, the wrestlers at Marseille's establishment, La Goulue[tn40], le Pétomane[tn41], and pass the time accrediting the Moulin Rouge and the Neuilly Fair whilst awaiting the Fair to end all Fairs, now under construction—the 1900 Universal Exhibition, which will principally serve as an excuse for native villages and belly dancing.

I'm perfectly aware that beneath this apparent flabbiness the mettle of the race persists, and that in 1914 a single trumpet blast sufficed to straighten every spine and shatter this mask of apathy and fatuousness. Even so, I experience a kind of bewilderment paging through those newspapers, stuffed with frivolous chatter, trumped-up scandals, boudoir secrets and backstage whispers, as I do at this moment in the anguish of invasion, whilst the world crumbles, Big Bertha pounds away, and every fifteen minutes my windows shudder from the blasts. Ah, if only one could still "take life as a jolly jape"!

I haven't yet exhausted fashion's commandments as catalogued by the Parisian almanac. I've kept the choicest morsels for last—those revealing that however utterly bereft of ideals a society may be, instinct whispers that no true elegance exists without consorting with the Muses, and that from them the spirit receives its ultimate lustre. Behold what the snobs of 1897 deemed specially fashioned for their particular requirements: "Hold forth on Nietzsche, Ibsen, Darwin, Schopenhauer. Ridicule our fathers' music, revere Franck, thrill to Wagner, endeavour to grasp Beethoven. Discourse on the Primitives in painting. Have made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth or plan to next season. Read the Young Reviews [Symbolist literary magazines]. Cultivate SYMBOLIST poets."

Our ancient châteaux once welcomed wandering minstrels. Through vestigial tradition, the nobility still receives poets in its salons, though only for tea. Not so long ago, they offered unstinting hospitality. Great ladies gloried in maintaining open house for literary folk, welcoming even the grubby bohemians without fretting over the silver. The hungry pack would materialise at dinner hour. The most threadbare were prized as "more authentic". No ceremonies of invitation or introduction required. No credentials needed save being known to someone present. Having once crossed the hostess's line of vision granted newcomers licence to bring their own guests to the next gathering. Thus it was chez the Countess de Callias, and likewise, in Symbolism's early days, chez Princess Ratazzi, née Bonaparte, and chez Léonide Leblanc. Splendid women both, these notabilities from such disparate spheres, one remarkable for her eccentricities, the other for her devastating wit.

When the Princess permitted you to enquire after her health or her loved ones, you might receive this sort of reply: "I'm tolerably pleased with Messalina at present, but Nana causes me serious worry." A stranger might suppose she meant her daughters. She meant her feet, prone to gout, which she'd thus baptised. Léonide Leblanc never minced words. During Marshal Bazaine's trial at Trianon[tn42], she found herself barred from the packed courtroom where the Duc d'Aumale[tn43] presided. Yet one chair stood empty. The usher explained it was reserved for a companion of the Duke's who'd breakfasted with him that very morning. Such intimacy demanded special consideration. "Oh, he breakfasted with the Duke this morning?" Léonide Leblanc shot back at full volume before the riveted crowd. "Well then, I'm bedding the Duke tonight!" Shouldering past the stunned usher, she breached the barrier, swept into the chamber, and claimed the seat.

The poets might have displayed some gratitude towards these benefactresses and accorded them special regard, but "cattiness" was then the mode and "caddishness" quite the thing. In the *Petit Bottin des Lettres et des Arts* (1886), Princess Ratazzi finds herself listed amongst the "old moons", whilst Léonide Leblanc received this acid notice: "Dimming star of the Odéon, entertains at her mansion, alongside the Orléans family, various young poets whose wit she harnesses to autograph, complete with dedications, tambourines she's selected at the Louvre department store." Mind you, the poets savaged one another equally. Consider these excerpts from the same directory, fruit of their collective effort:

CHARLES MORICE — From Lyon; shares with fellow townsman Chenavard the anachronistic bent and woolly generalisations.

FRANÇOIS COPPÉE — A testament to what dogged persistence can achieve in the cut-price linen trade. Recently annexed to his drapery shop an emporium of theatrical props and historical costumes for artists' models, trading under the sign of the Green Palms.

PAUL DÉROULÈDE — Hawker. Flogs tricolour badges in the throng.

ÉMILE GOUDEAU — Distinguished monologist. Pity he doesn't rhyme as well as Paul Bilhaut.

HEREDIA — Goldwork, damascening, tooled Cordovan leather.

JULES LAFORGUE — Sleek and chubby young fellow. Croons sly complaints to the moon. This lunatic serves as reader to the Empress Augusta. Imagine the poor woman's agonies if he recites his verses!

JULES LEMAÎTRE — Belongs to that breed of École Normale graduates—the most lethal sort—who feign comprehension.

MALLARMÉ — Offspring of the teratological union between Mlle Sangalli[tn44], Father Didon[tn45], and the illustrious Sapeck[21].

ROLLINAT — Bogeyman for elderly spiritualist ladies.

SULLY-PRUDHOMME — Earnest and diligent Academician.

LAURENT TAILHADE — Mystical flower-fancier. Shows insufficient regard for little ladies' delicate sensibilities.

ANDRÉ THEURIET — Rural constable.

PAUL VERLAINE — ...currently lodges on the Place de la Roquette, upon which he shall doubtless expire.

We'd best draw the curtain here. The picturesque has its limits.

Oscar Wilde in Paris

On the corner of the rue de Médicis and the rue de Vaugirard once stood a wine merchant's establishment with a red shopfront, trading under the sign of the Côte d'Or. This establishment, hallowed by memories of Jules Vallès and Séverine who had been regulars, maintained its tradition of hospitality to students and men of letters. A private cabinet was reserved for them on the entresol, connected to the public bar by a corkscrew staircase. Here they could withdraw from the ordinary clientele—a motley crowd, as unschooled in fine manners as in elegant speech, with one exception: a cab driver called Old Moore who, stung by the versifying fever, abused the postal service without shame, bombarding celebrities with his poetic lucubrations. How often one would see him at the bar, unfolding with pride before the wonderstruck or indifferent eyes of his colleagues a congratulatory letter he'd once received from Victor Hugo, declaiming it with emphasis though he knew every word by heart! He would draw it with devotion from a filthy wallet. Grimy and worn to rags through handling, it had lost nothing of its pristine glory in his eyes.

Moréas—mercurial and restless, forever seeking comforts he could never find, settling anywhere only long enough to discover compelling reasons to decamp—nevertheless remained loyal to the Côte d'Or for three or four seasons. His presence drew custom and brought the establishment renewed cachet. The poets flocked after him. There he would dine, surrounded by all the bright young hopes of the French Parnassus. The meals stretched long into the evening, seasoned with lofty debate. Ah! those convivial and enchanting soirées where so many varied opinions clashed and parried! The aesthete Charles Morice would pontificate, grave and magisterial. The mischievous Édouard Dubus would conjure scintillating paradoxes from thin air. The mystagogue Julien Leclercq would cast horoscopes for one and all, prophesying whilst caressing his abundant Nubian camel-driver's locks with tapered fingers. The ebullient Adolphe Retté, when he tired of loosing arrows at all comers, would expound a system of vehement pantheism or bamboozle the provincial bards and earnest École Normale students who'd been rash enough to venture in. The frail and refined Henri Degron would croon precious melodies with languid grace, like some young Hyrcanian[tn46] prince starved of sunlight, wilting in our harsh climate.

Following the poets' debates with rapt attention sat the wood engraver Clément Bellanger, then working on an image of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Albert Trakcsel, architect of the Fêtes réelles, conjured dreamscapes in his listeners' imaginations, multiplied through enchanted perspectives. The painter Gauguin, dubbed "the Redskin"—

A true savage adrift in the city of stone

—unable to adapt to our civilisation, yearning to return to his Pacific islands, would jabber away with the negress he'd brought back from Tahiti. One might also encounter that extraordinary Meyerson, polyglot and omniscient, the last avatar of Pico della Mirandola[tn47], ever ready to discourse de omnibus rebus et quibusdam aliis[tn48], and that poor, ill-starred Frédéric Corbier, mathematician and philologist,

who would intoxicate himself with noise and talk in company, only to plunge, when alone, into such black despair that he would end his days one winter night by hurling himself from the Pont d'Arcole into the ice-choked Seine.

Standing against Symbolist excess was the sage counsel of the Romance faction. Charles Maurras, bent on restoring the sovereignty of Intelligence, battled the encroachments of muddled sensibility and, opposing the neurotic aesthetes, urged us not to reduce the world to mere décor nor judge things solely by sensory evidence. Maurice du Plessys, a mind both firm and lucid, ever seeking noble models, had just forsaken La Fontaine to enlist in the school of Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, last keeper of Alcaeus's lyre[tn49]. He spread its gospel, to the bewilderment of the libertarian poets who, lacking culture and judgement, couldn't follow suit. For them, Poetry began with the present century, and outside Mallarmé there was no salvation. Imperious and subtle, confident in his vision, the author of *Études lyriques* took pride—to confound the doctrinaires of radical individualism and passionate eccentricity—in versifying nothing but commonplaces. You should have heard him explode at the contrary arguments of ignorance and folly. He would erupt in an enigmatic and peculiar laugh, sharp and mocking, a laugh whose volleys rent the air with persistent and terrible force. This laugh unnerved the braggarts and, like a cockcrow, sufficed to send the routed pack of asses into headlong flight. Desrousseaux, armed with vast erudition, was the oracle everyone consulted in disputed matters, when an ancient text needed citing or a corrupted passage wanted restoration. Son of the celebrated Lille chansonnier, he would sometimes, in high spirits, strike up one of his father's ditties at dessert in rich local patois, but quickly resuming his natural gravity, would return to themes of learned discourse, developing them either with Paul Souday, eager to become the new Sainte-Beuve, or with Maindron, one of Heredia's sons-in-law and a walking compendium of defunct customs, or with Moréas, then infatuated with archaisms and our ancient fabliaux[tn50]. Dauphin Meunier, who would forsake verse for criticism and dedicate himself to illuminating the murky corners of Mirbeau's life, lent his sly and nimble wit to the Romance cause, whilst Marcel Coulon—diminutive, inquisitive, sharp-eyed—already cast about the searching gaze of an investigating magistrate. He already betrayed that appetite for exactitude and precision that would soon lead him to apply the rigorous methods of anthropometry and criminal investigation to his literary researches. Raymond de la Tailhède, nodding periodically in polite acknowledgement of speakers whose arguments he appeared to follow, was actually lost in silent contemplation, never ceasing to weave, amid the din, the tapestry of his perpetual waking dream. We mustn't forget the musician Dubreuilh, who championed a restoration of French music and considered *La Dame blanche* one of its supreme achievements.

The establishment's waiter was a lad of twenty or so, fair-haired with bright blue eyes, who bore unflinchingly—to Moréas's delight—the glorious name of Amand, and who had won the poets' favour through his eagerness to serve them at other customers' expense. Their company had given him a veneer of literary knowledge. He preened himself on this before the common herd. Perhaps he secretly scribbled verses himself; certainly he held the Muses in special reverence. He had taken the cabbie Moore under his wing, never failing to show us his daily productions and faithfully reporting the approval we granted out of courtesy.

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Among the Côte d'Or dinners that have entered the literary chronicles of that era, pride of place goes to the one that first brought Oscar Wilde together with the Romance poets. This was during Wilde's inaugural visit to Paris, where he arrived trailing clouds of glory as a great poet, and which proved one long triumphal progress.

The most exclusive salons flung open their doors to receive him. This conquering hero, unwilling to return to London without making a complete survey of our men and matters, expressed a wish to meet Moréas. His nationality, no less than his reputation, commended him to "the Athenian pride of Gaul." Moréas had retained from youth his bedazzlement with English literature, and his admiration embraced the entire island race. He made no secret of this admiration, even during the Boer War[tn51], and to those who expressed surprise in an Anglophobic and jingoistic Paris at seeing him parade his preference for our neighbours across the Channel, he would retort unshakably: "They have Shakespeare!" Even when freed, in his Romance period, from Romantic illusions and Celtic mists, he continued to embrace Byron's view that whilst Shakespeare makes the worst of models, he remains the most extraordinary of poets. And he, grandson of Admiral Tombatzis, hero of the Greek uprising, never forgot that this same Byron had taken up arms against the Turks and championed his homeland's cause. He therefore sent word to Wilde that he would receive him at dinner in his customary haunt. Anxious to shine, flanked by his Romance general staff, he commanded that the room be reserved exclusively, all intruders barred. Nothing in the usual protocol had changed, save that a bouquet graced the table—though this was a touch from the sentimental Amand. Proud to serve an illustrious man whose name filled the newspapers, he had yielded to this delicate impulse. He had borne the expense himself, consulting no one. It was his tribute to Genius. Amand had donned his Sunday-best alpaca jacket for the occasion. His shirtfront blazed like armour in sunlight, and his hair, more liberally pomaded than usual, announced that he too wished to cut a figure. He had even adorned his buttonhole with a carnation and carried under his arm—mirabile dictu!—that luxury unknown in proletarian establishments: a clean dish-cloth.

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Wilde made his entrance at the appointed hour, escorted by Stuart Merrill, who had brokered the meeting, and a personal friend, a compatriot ignorant of our language whom he omitted to introduce. His unprepossessing appearance made the first impression disagreeable. Corpulent, phlegmatic, thick-lipped, with decayed teeth, he presented an uninviting aspect, soon redeemed by the intelligence of his gaze, the unction of his gestures, and the magic of his conversation. The dinner proved cordial, though marked by a certain official stiffness. Literature monopolised the conversation. Moréas seized his chance to demolish nineteenth-century poetics, dismissing Hugo as vulgar, Baudelaire as merely paradoxical. He found merit only in Lamartine, "the best, or at least the least contaminated of the Romantics." The company observed one another, maintaining cautious reserve. Only at dessert, when the verses began, did spirits kindle. After the last piece had been recited, Oscar Wilde rose and begged leave to depart, claiming another engagement. Stuart Merrill has left us a dubious account of this dinner—whether memory failed him or he succumbed to the lure of a good story. He alleges that Wilde, accustomed in London to holding the floor unchallenged and monopolising the incense, took umbrage at hearing verses that praised only Moréas, and made his escape. True, the Romance poets had inherited from their Pléiade forebears the genial custom of saluting one another in verse, but they abstained that evening. Moréas had recited the *Églogue à Emilius*,

du Plessys the stanzas to *Alcandre*, La Tailhède a fragment from *La Métamorphose des Fontaines*. What I myself recited scarcely matters. Suffice to say it contained no mention of Moréas. So the subject of our verses cannot have wounded Wilde, nor do I believe anything wounded him.

The proof came a few days later when, encountering me on the Boulevard des Capucines as I emerged from his hotel, he approached me warmly: "I applaud Moréas and his school," he said, "for wanting to restore Greek harmony and revive the Dionysian spirit amongst us. The world thirsts so for joy! We haven't yet escaped the Syrian stranglehold and its corpse-like deities. We're still mired in the kingdom of shadows. Until a new religion of light dawns, let Olympus be our shelter and sanctuary. We must let our instincts laugh and gambol in the sun like a band of merry children. I adore life. How beautiful it is!" And so saying, he gestured at the spectacle before us.

It was early June. Gaiety danced in the air. Sunshine set the boulevards ablaze, decked as they were with fresh green foliage. Light played across the façades, sparkled on windows and pink canvas awnings, glinted on gilt-lettered balconies, and kindled the horizon to apotheosis. Along the roadway, sprightly carriages flashed past like meteors, bearing Parisian ladies who languished beneath the dancing blooms of their multicoloured parasols. Paris rang with festive tumult. "Ah!" exclaimed Wilde, "how this surpasses the drowsy beauty of the countryside! Rural solitude suffocates and oppresses me. Have you noticed how the azure sky speaks more eloquently to the soul in cities, how flowers are more poignant here? I worship this heightened life, this human friction, this furtive commerce of glances, this proximity to fever and passion. I'm only truly myself amongst elegant crowds, drunk on the excitement of capitals, in the heart of fashionable quarters or amid the splendour of grand hotels—those crossroads of the cosmopolitan elite—surrounded by every conceivable comfort and legions of servants, with the warm caress of carpet beneath one's feet. I'm enchanted by all the refinements of comfort, that supreme efflorescence of civilisation. I loathe nature where man hasn't interwoven his artifice." Wilde steered me towards the luxury displays, the costly shopfronts, the jewellers'. "I'm besotted with jewels," he continued, "as with all things futile and beautiful whose very uselessness enhances their worth. Contemplating them gave me the notion to write Salomé. The vision came to me helmeted in gold, cascading with precious stones. Look at these diamonds of such pure water, arranged in a tiara fit for a young empress's brow, yet destined perhaps to deck some nouveau-riche fishwife whose vulgarity and ugliness they'll only emphasise. And to think these incandescent specks of light spring from base coal! Just so the poet, drawing his substance from common humanity, becomes through simple crystallisation their miracle, acquiring inestimable value over them. By what alchemy do the elements of that friable matter, coal, combine to form an adamantine block blessed with unique properties? Precious stones resist ambient temperature. The diamond remains inviolate; even the irresistible force of electricity glances off it. Likewise the poet transcends ordinary laws and common necessities. Genius possesses inalienable rights. When Benvenuto Cellini crucified a living man to study how muscles contort in agony, the Pope was right to grant absolution. What signifies the death of some anonymous individual if it serves to birth an immortal work and creates, as Keats put it, an everlasting spring of delight?"

When I ventured to speak of his works, Oscar Wilde checked me with a gesture: "Oh, let's not bother with all that! I regard such things as trifling! I pursue them for diversion and to prove to myself —as your Baudelaire did, though with greater genius—that I'm not inferior to these contemporaries I hold in contempt. My ambitions aren't confined to versifying. I want to make my very life into a work of art. I know the worth of a fine line of poetry, but equally that of a rose, a distinguished vintage, a

perfectly chosen cravat, or an exquisite dish." I summarise Wilde's discourse here, but what I cannot render is its peculiar turn and expression. Wilde spoke our language imperfectly. The mot juste would elude him, and he'd substitute either the English term or some French approximation hazarded on the spur of the moment, not always with happy results. Thus comedy crept into the gravity of his pronouncements. Montaigne, when pressed for expression, would say: "If French won't serve, let Gascon have a go!" Wilde resorted to pidgin. At war with gender and syntax, he once concluded a tale thus: "At that moment, the queen—he is dead!"

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We were passing the Napolitain when a thin, piercing voice—an uncanny falsetto—hailed us. It was La Jeunesse, who'd spotted us from the depths of the café through its open glass front. Wizened, lanky and gaunt in his slovenly clothes, his shirt bunching out from his corkscrewed trousers, yet bedecked with jewels like a cathedral reliquary, he approached and took charge of our introductions.

The aperitif hour was upon us. The slender boulevard café, all cream and gold with its garnet velvet banquettes—a sort of low-ceilinged corridor—was thronged with patrons. At one table, a man of Olympian bearing held court amongst a coterie of aesthetes, pontificating, ruddy and pink through a haze of tobacco smoke, like a deity wreathed in incense. This was Catulle Mendès. He was holding forth in stentorian, professorial tones.

Our entrance caught him mid-flourish, absorbed by his audience, just as he was declaring with a curt gesture: "I won't be trodden on!" Whether concluding some dispute or parrying a tentative complaint, he broke off at the sight of Oscar Wilde and, in deference, made room for us beside him. After the requisite pleasantries, conversation resumed. Wilde, keen to inform himself about French poetic currents, solicited Mendès's views. Mendès sang the praises of the Parnassians and proclaimed that amongst living poets, Armand Silvestre was most deserving of admiration. He rhapsodised about his sixty thousand verses, declaring them "one sustained ascent toward the purest ideal." He even lauded his prose and defended his tales against charges of bawdiness and vulgarity with a fervour so suspect it seemed a roundabout method of self-vindication. Wilde listened wordlessly, an almost imperceptible smile playing at his lips. Mendès declaimed on, dropping his pronouncements like oracles, head thrown back, intermittently tossing his leonine mane or adjusting his flowing cravat. He tossed compliments in passing to Léon Dierx and Albert Glatigny, then launched a wholesale assault on the Symbolists. The barbed sallies and jests of the caustic Ernest La Jeunesse, who defended them poorly, seemed only to pour oil on the flames. Mendès proclaimed: "The Symbolists are laughable. They've invented nothing. The symbol is as old as time itself, and whom do they invoke? Baudelaire—an elegiac Satan. The French masters they claim have all gone to seed. Verlaine is Desbordes-Valmore in trousers. Mallarmé is, as Cros put it, a shattered Baudelaire whose fragments could never be reassembled. What's Rimbaud but a belated Romantic, a naturalist Pétrus Borel? And Tristan Corbière? Nothing but a wretched parodist of Pierre Dupont. They've made some noise about Jules Laforgue. He's merely the sketch of something indefinable, a stuttering. His puerile, clanging verses have provoked a succès de scandale. Tomorrow they'll be forgotten. Nor have the Symbolists innovated in form. The true pioneer of free verse and Symbolist technique is a Peruvian from Lima, the artillery lieutenant della Rocca de Vergalo, who introduced the 'nicarine strophe' into prosody along with all the liberties the new poets claim. He elided mute syllables, abolished capitals at line beginnings, discarded

the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes, and ultimately arrived at a kind of rhythmic prose. Free verse is nothing more. The Peruvian poet himself declared: 'I shall found a school because my verse is revolution.'"

Mendès then proceeded to review the younger poets of the day, systematically denying them any originality. In his reckoning, Henri de Régnier was wholly contained within Banville and Hugo—the Hugo of the *Idylles*. He excoriated Paul Fort's spurious simplicity and what he termed the Belgian aesthetic. For Francis Vielé-Griffin, he professed himself cunningly incompetent: "I prefer to believe he's beyond my grasp, for if there's only what I've understood in him, there's precious little indeed."[22]

This dialectical stratagem so struck Oscar Wilde that he remarked upon it as we departed: "Did you notice," I observed, "what Mendès was saying as we entered? Vielé-Griffin isn't merely a poet. He's a critic who wields a rather caustic pen. He treats his contradictors and elders without mercy. Perhaps he trod on Mendès's toes."

"Be that as it may," Wilde concluded, "the fellow is devilishly entertaining."

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To comprehend Oscar Wilde, one must remember he was Irish. He belonged to that race, reviled and persecuted for centuries, yet proud, indomitable, and steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the conqueror's law. Their oppressors malign them with insulting derision. They scorn Irish pride and choose to see in their systematic opposition mere vulgar contrariness. The Irish return their persecutors' contempt in kind. Oscar Wilde, though he professed immunity from prejudice, unconsciously bore this ancestral hostility, and having encountered in London that same puritanical severity, that same hypocritical obstinacy of cant (one recalls that the Irish pride themselves on their reputation for chastity) from which his free and sensuous nature suffered, he felt doubly impelled to break free—both by instinct and by desire to confound a detested race. To combat this, he would turn to dandyism. He saw in it an elegant means of flouting his contemporaries.

Extremity begets extremity. Excessive constraint provokes rebellion. To cast off the hateful yoke, our modern anarchists dream of overturning the world and blasting their path to freedom with bombs. What childish delusion! This is the resort of crude minds devoid of judgement. Subtle and perceptive natures circumvent insurmountable obstacles. They deploy a more effective weapon. They have recourse to irony. Dynamite, by justifying the repressive terror it unleashes, merely strengthens tyrannical authority. The fear of ridicule, however, paralyses it.

People have marvelled at Baudelaire's paradoxes and eccentricities. They haven't considered that these stemmed from the need to react against the spirit of cant that had taken root in France during the Restoration, imported by émigrés returning from London. Baudelaire's example illuminates Oscar Wilde's paradoxes and eccentricities. It's the same compulsion to unmask hypocrisy and confound stupidity. This is why these two geniuses, so remote from one another, so dissimilar, so diverse in essence and tendency, nevertheless converged in their divergent methods at one point of practice, and found communion in the religion of dandyism.

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Dandyism (as I've written elsewhere regarding Baudelaire[23]) is not, as commonly misconstrued, an exercise in frivolity. Even Carlyle misunderstood it, seeing merely a matter of tailoring and sartorial aesthetics. While dandyism has many varieties, at the core of each lies hatred of restraint and defiance hurled at oppressive power. Dandyism is the protest of lucid common sense against blind prejudice. It's the individual's revolt against the jealous collective. Its art lies in defeating the enemy with his own forces. Dandyism attempts independence from all illegitimate tyrannies. The most illegitimate is the tyranny of public opinion. Hence dandyism had to arise where this illegitimate power exercises its greatest rigour: in England. Dandyism is quintessentially English. Its very name, lacking equivalent in any other tongue, proclaims this. Dandyism is a flower that blooms amongst ruins, born from the decomposition of empires, flourishing at that twilight hour when yesterday's elite, stripped of virtue, retains a vestige of prestige—as the sky, when the sun departs, preserves a final glow. Dandyism emerges when, amid threats of general chaos, certain modes of the old order acquire richer significance and a demarcation line still divides the declining aristocracy from the surging democratic flood. Dandyism arose from the chaotic upheaval of the nineteenth century with George Brummell[tn52]. Brummell sought to rescue individual rights from the egalitarian catastrophe, to replace caste nobility with intellectual nobility, to counter birthright privilege with the privilege of genius, and to maintain, as society's armature, a necessary hierarchy, a scale of values.

Doubtless this preoccupation of Brummell's, dictated by circumstance, had manifested itself previously in elevated minds during similar troubled times, for like causes produce like effects. Alcibiades amongst the Greeks and Petronius amongst the Romans had attempted to stem the tide of vulgarity, but for this state of mind we call dandyism to achieve its full force and cohesion required special conditions and the peculiar mentality of a people who pride themselves on a virtue Stendhal deemed stupidly ridiculous and which Rémy de Gourmont mocked so persistently. Amongst the Latins, morals are too relaxed, opinion too lenient for the theory of dandyism to crystallise in all its severity. People have sought French precursors to Brummell. They've cited Lauzun, the Duc de Richelieu, d'Orsay. They've constructed flimsy, hazardous parallels based on superficial resemblances. These can only be surface features. Nothing connects the elegant bearing of a Lauzun, Richelieu, or d'Orsay with Brummell's doctrine. Their entire secret lay in the art of pleasing. Brummell disdained such facile conquest. His art was to displease. He ruled through insolence, through mortification. His life was sustained bravado. He delighted in making people smart under his lash. Therein lay his originality. It's so demanding a profession that no other has managed it, requiring such mental strain, such vigilance over oneself, every gesture, every word, that even he sacrificed his sanity to it. Spare me talk of Barbey d'Aurevilly's dandyism, which was, I grant, a protest against plebeian vulgarity, but which ultimately amounted to bluster and masquerade. To parade in velvet and lace, to flaunt garish colours, violates the principles of dandyism as Brummell formulated them: "The true dandy must never draw attention." Barbey d'Aurevilly knew this—he'd written about Brummell[24]—yet ignored it. Dandyism demands a steady soul immune to passionate upheavals and cannot accommodate tempestuous impulses. Hence poets are ill-suited to it. Byron couldn't sustain his dandy role to the finish, still less could "Mademoiselle Byron"—Alfred de Musset. Baudelaire fared no better, though with his eagle's vision he'd perceived the doctrine more clearly than his French predecessors. And Oscar Wilde would come to grief over it, having insufficiently pondered Brummell's counsel: "The dandy must know when to stop and, the moment the effect is achieved, withdraw." The passionate have no business with dandyism. It's a strategy for cold blood. Brummell remains the authentic dandy who could command with a glance.

His presence conferred greater honour than the king's. His absence from court festivities counted as catastrophe. He ruled through terror: "Mind yourselves!" an anxious duchess would warn her daughter, "Brummell is watching!" And this dandyism he practised had at least the merit of genuine risk. When Baudelaire blasphemed, when Wilde hawked his atheistic epigrams through the salons[25], they risked only the displeasure of pious listeners, easily borne; when Brummell issued his decrees, he risked his head, and one might say he had the glory of risking it gallantly. He lost it, too—though not upon the scaffold.

Oscar Wilde's conviction was that man possessed the right to happiness and, as Goethe says, to a philosophy that doesn't annihilate his personality, and he deemed all means to that end legitimate.

To proclaim this to the English required audacity. Wilde felt the danger all the more acutely because he himself, despite his protestations, bore the mark of the Bible. One's early education is a garment never shed, sometimes resembling for its wearer the shirt of Nessus[tn53]. Wilde retained the dread of sin. He'd been nourished on Scripture. Vainly did he reject its teaching—it seeped from his very pores. From Scripture he'd acquired the habit of speaking exclusively in parables. As he disguised his thought, so he disguised his person. He strolled the streets with his legendary sunflower; sported a green carnation in his buttonhole; cultivated disagreeable, outrageous mannerisms; flaunted vices he didn't possess. He employed falsehood to combat falsehood. When, having scattered gold in his wake, he departed declaring, "I believe I've thoroughly corrupted them," one mustn't detect in this cynical avowal some diabolical pleasure in corruption. Its true import is: "I've taught these people, drunk on pride and self-regard, a lesson in humility. They presume to speak of virtue. They know nothing of it. I've demonstrated that theirs can be purchased for a coin." It was to force them to recognise their frailty and, consequently, to cultivate indulgence and compassion for their neighbours' weaknesses. Wilde wasn't a believer like Baudelaire. He had no refuge save Art. Hence he'd made it his religion. "Art," he declared, "surpasses Nature, which merely repeats itself. A work of art's value lies in being unique; yet the artist mustn't be deceived by his faith. Still, he must play his part to the end." Wilde's error—or his excuse, depending on one's vantage—was his inability to sustain his role to the finish. What inconsistency to invoke the protection of laws he'd sought to demolish and to appeal to opinion after a lifetime spent repudiating it! By resorting to the courts, by claiming injury from outcries he'd deliberately provoked, Wilde contradicted his former stance and theories. How unexpected to see this swaggerer of vice suddenly anxious for his reputation.

Wilde paid dearly enough for his transgressions that oblivion should settle over them, and what redeems him in our estimation is that he rushed toward his catastrophe as toward suicide. He sensed the necessity of atonement. "It had to be," he confessed upon emerging from the prison where his genius was refined. From it he gained his masterpiece.

And therein lies the moral of his story.

Stéphane Mallarmé

The death of Mallarmé on 9 September 1898[26] stripped the Symbolist circle of its crown—for he had been their true leader.

What distinguished this poet was his capacity to banish tepidness and indifference. As Verlaine observed, one must either love or loathe him immensely. Like all innovators and dissidents, he provoked fierce controversy. Whilst some proclaimed him the messiah of pure lyricism, others went so far as to pronounce him a charlatan. The latter saw in his verse nothing but incoherent, sprawling verbiage:

Insolite vaisseau d'inanité sonore[27]
[Strange vessel of sonorous emptiness]

whilst the former swooned over it as before a new gospel, each word pregnant with revelation, defending it with such jealous fervour that the slightest objection appeared sacrilegious in their eyes, leaving criticism thoroughly intimidated. This study seeks to explain, if not reconcile, such divergent judgements—an impartial reckoning of the debate.

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Stéfane Mallarmé (as he long preferred to style his name) was a slight man, correctly and carefully turned out, with eyes blooming with gentleness and the pointed ears of a faun, possessed of extreme affability and absolute refinement. He drew one's sympathy not merely through his obliging reception, but through an indefinable air of suffering that suffused his entire person. Beneath the preciosity of his delicate gestures and aristocratic polish, one detected that timidity, that voluntary self-effacement, that cautious pliancy which the habit of discipline or fear of rebuke instils in subordinate functionaries. He was indeed a functionary, and life had treated him harshly.

Born in Paris on 18 March 1842 into an old bourgeois family without means, he had been obliged to provide for himself from an early age. His education begun at an Auteuil boarding school and completed at the Sens lycée, he felt the calling of letters, yet knew that the profession barely sustains its practitioners and that a poet anxious to fulfil himself nobly must, above all, secure his intellectual independence through supplementary resources. Having acquired the elements of English at the lycée, he went to London to perfect his command of the language and earn his bread by teaching it. He remained two years, from 1862 to 1864, subsisting meagrely on the French lessons he gave here and there. Back in Paris with the necessary qualifications, he sought a position in the University. This was when Catulle Mendès, in concert with Louis-Xavier de Ricard, had just founded the Parnasse contemporain, which gathered the new poets. Energetic and bustling, Mendès, Mallarmé's contemporary, already enjoyed considerable reputation and could boast a literary past—at eighteen he

had created the *Revue fantaisiste*, counting amongst its contributors the elder generation—Gautier, Baudelaire, Banville, Arsène Houssaye, Champfleury, Gozlan—alongside promising youth like Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Alphonse Daudet. He had authored a volume of verse, Philoméla. Mallarmé consented to an introduction through their mutual friend Emmanuel des Essarts. Mendès was then lodging with his father at Choisy-le-Roi. He has left us an account of this first encounter—our earliest portrait of Mallarmé. After luncheon, the two young men strolled along the Seine.

Mendès recounts:

"Mallarmé was frail, with a countenance at once austere and plaintive, gentle in its bitterness, already marked by distress and disappointment. He had tiny, almost feminine hands and a dandyism in his gestures somewhat brittle and broken. Yet his eyes displayed the purity found in very young children's eyes, a purity of distant transparencies, and his voice, with something slightly deliberate in its fluid accentuation, caressed. With an air of attaching no importance to the melancholy things he related, he told me he had lived quite wretchedly in London for some considerable time, a poor French master, that he had suffered greatly in that enormous, indifferent city from isolation and penury, and from an illness, a kind of languor, which had rendered him temporarily incapable of intellectual application and literary will. Then he gave me verses to read. They were inscribed in fine, correct, infinitely meticulous handwriting in one of those tiny leather notebooks that close with a small brass clasp."

These verses were *Les Fenêtres*, *Les Fleurs*, *Le Guignon*, *L'Azur*... which Mendès confesses left him wonderstruck.

Soon after, Mallarmé was appointed English master at Tournon, then Avignon, where Mendès and Villiers rediscovered him after seven years' separation, established with his wife and daughter "in a little pink house behind trees". Following a "very brief" luncheon attended by Mistral, Mallarmé conducted his visitors to his study and read them the work upon which he was labouring:

"It was," Mendès continues, "a rather lengthy German tale, a sort of Rhineland legend, entitled Igitur d'Elbénone. From the opening lines, I was appalled, and Villiers alternately consulted me with furtive glances and goggled at the reader, his little eyes bulging with bewilderment. What! This was where such prolonged, sustained intellectual effort had led—to this work whose subject never revealed itself, this style where Art was certainly evident, but where words, as though by some systematic wager, alas!, refused to signify their proper meaning?... I dared not venture an opinion. I felt immense sadness. I pleaded travel fatigue and withdrew to my chamber. The following day I departed for Paris without Mallarmé having questioned me about *Igitur d'Elbénone*."

And Mendès is inclined to believe that Mallarmé's condition reflects the aftermath of his illness and poverty in London, and that the memory of his misfortunes, fermented through six years of solitude and isolation, had finally unsettled his reason. Mendès never wished to revise this impression, writing of Mallarmé in 1900:

"I ardently hope to have been mistaken; yes, from the depths of my heart, I truly hope that my companion of youth merited becoming the initiator, the spiritual guide of future generations, but, with sorrow, I do not believe it and have had to resign myself to saying so."

From Mendès's account we learn that by twenty, Mallarmé had written the greater part of his verse and was already filled with gall and bitterness. He already presented the image of the "weary poet whom life withers" and "whose hunger no fruit here can satisfy". And indeed, Mallarmé's youthful verses testify to a talent confident in itself yet tormented by its disgrace. He numbers himself amongst the flock of "beggars of azure" upon whom "Misfortune" rains redoubled blows. He is twenty. Already the world is insufferable to him.

Et le vomissement impur de la bêtise
Me force à me boucher le nez devant l'azur.

[And the foul vomit of stupidity
Forces me to hold my nose before the azure.]

Mysterious voices summon him:

Je suis hanté! l'azur! l'azur! l'azur!
[I am haunted! The azure! The azure! The azure!]

But how to weigh anchor, how to escape?

Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse?
[Where to flee in this useless, perverse revolt?]

He contemplates "beautiful" suicide:

Mais un jour, fatigué d'avoir enfin tiré,
O Satan! j'ôterai la pierre et me pendrai.

[But one day, weary at last of struggling,
O Satan! I'll remove the stone and hang myself.]

Meanwhile, he yearns to sleep, to see no more, hear no more of earthly matters. He would clothe himself in:

L'insensibilité de l'azur et des pierres.
[The insensibility of azure and of stones.]

Because:

La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres.
Partir!... je partirai!

[The flesh is sad, alas! and I have read all the books.
Depart!... I shall depart!]

But no, the revulsion persists and he must ascend his calvary to the end. He likens himself to the swan whose wing the ice imprisons. He feels so mocked, so derided, that he no longer dares confide his thoughts to those around him—neither to his adoring wife nor to his own flesh and blood.

He unleashes his desperate doubt in the *Don du poème*. Charles Cros remarked: "Mallarmé is a shattered Baudelaire whose fragments could never be pieced together." Let us take the witticism for what it's worth, yet we must acknowledge that Mallarmé remained under Baudelaire's dominion and that his work, as has been observed, is but a diluted appendix to *Les Fleurs du Mal*. He had, moreover, drunk from the same wellsprings of English idealism and shares with Baudelaire two common traits: precocity and the sense of his own impotence:

Et dans mon être à qui le sang morne préside
L'impuissance s'étire en un long bâillement.

[And in my being over which torpid blood presides
Impotence stretches out in one long yawn.]

Understand that impotence here is not sterility, but springs from the artist's despair at failing to attain perfection. Baudelaire confessed he never approached his writing desk without anguish, and Mallarmé, like him, sees in the blank page "a formidable enemy to vanquish". And where to find a foothold in his isolation?

He had lived isolated in London, isolated in the provinces. We find him isolated in Paris in 1873. He teaches English at the Lycée Condorcet. Misunderstood by his pupils, who organise monstrous riots against him, he meets only hostility and setbacks everywhere. He once confessed to Paul Adam: "I have never crossed the Batignolles viaduct (he crossed it daily) without feeling the urge to hurl myself into the void."[28]

He seeks refuge in Art. From 1874 to 1875, he single-handedly produces *La Dernière Mode*, a gazette of society and family where "the laws and true principles of the wholly aesthetic life were promulgated, down to the understanding of the smallest details: dress, jewellery, furnishings, and even theatrical programmes and dinner menus". One detects Ruskin's influence here, yet this gazette could serve only to satisfy a personal need. Mallarmé undertook nothing to compel attention that was not pure loss.

One day, Coquelin the elder, scheduled for an extraordinary performance heralded throughout the press and attended by le Tout-Paris, proposed to declaim an unpublished poem and approached Banville on the matter. The latter referred him to Mallarmé, wishing to furnish him with an opportunity for profitable publicity. Mallarmé thanked him effusively and set to work. He composed some hundred lines. The actor had scarcely glanced at the manuscript when he flushed crimson and thrust it aside irritably, convinced he was being mocked. These verses were *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. One understands that the composition offered nothing to satisfy the monologue specialist and scarcely suited the customary qualities of his repertoire. The matter ended there, and Mallarmé had probably harboured no illusions about the outcome of his attempt. Nevertheless, the brutality of the refusal was hardly calculated to lighten his spirits and only entrenched him further in his dark humours.

Mallarmé thus appeared resigned to definitive disaster when Huysmans's book *À Rebours* (1884), which enjoyed keen success, determined his fortune. This book signalled Mallarmé as a poet who, "in a century of universal suffrage and in a time of lucre, lived apart, sheltered from surrounding stupidity by his disdain, delighting in refining already specious thoughts, grafting onto them Byzantine subtleties, perpetuating them in deductions barely indicated and connected by only the most imperceptible

thread." Huysmans discerned gleaming in Mallarmé's sibylline verses a late-imperial splendour, the marbling of a language in decay. He discovered there a refinement of decadence. Verlaine, conversely, saw evidence of vigorous art, and his slim volume *Les Poètes maudits*, appearing shortly after with Mallarmé featured within, struck the second note that would rouse attention around him.

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Mallarmé's singular character was perfectly fashioned to captivate young poets in quest of a new ideal. All of them began to frequent his circle, and it proves illuminating to trace in their writings the echo of their impressions.

Jean Moréas confesses that after reading the *Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*, he burned with but one desire: to meet the author of "those sublime verses". Louis Le Cardonnel, with whom he was already acquainted, undertook to present him to the master.

"We went," he recounts, "on an October evening in 1883, and had the good fortune to find him alone. His noble dialectic ravished me instantly. That house in the rue de Rome struck me from the very doorstep, from the staircase itself. It was, in truth, merely a vulgar modern dwelling, yet I believe—and mock me not—that the poet's presence had steeped it in enchantment.

There was undeniably something of the faun about Mallarmé; on certain days I found in him the gesture and grace of an ideal couturier. Had he not edited an extraordinary fashion journal, not for profit but for love of that art? Through his animated discourse, he could transform actresses' tights into a subject worthy of Plato.

Stéphane Mallarmé, that metaphysician, that abstracter who apprehended beauty in what I would call its invisible aspect, simultaneously conjured forth, through the sorcery within him, from all the scattered nothings of contemporary life, a clear fountain of aesthetic delight.

I saw Mallarmé often after that first visit. I saw him at his weekly receptions. I saw him alone, and formed of him an impression beyond expression."

Gustave Kahn in turn speaks of Mallarmé's "prestigious" conversation, "supple, significant, iridescent, coloured. It possessed a stylised abundance, a rich elegance, a novelty strewn with rare brilliants."

Laurent Tailhade equally marvels at this miraculous gift of speech:

"Never was there a more exquisite talker, more varied, more fertile in discoveries. Mallarmé guided his discourse, with invisible and discreet art, towards the loftiest ideality whilst never neglecting to pluck along the way all the flowers of his rich imagination. In living, precise, diaphanous, exact and luminous words, in phrases limpid as crystal, in a rather muffled voice... without weariness or pause, he unfurled, an infinite treasure, his noble paradoxes. He formulated a rare wisdom, an elegant and disdainful philosophy in unexpected axioms. His eloquence surprised, initially, through its clarity... Nothing more lucid, more direct than his discourse. The poet revealed himself as the favoured heir of Rivarol, of Chamfort, of those masters who could compress a book's substance into a phrase and brought the art of conversation to its absolute perfection."[29]

I can bear witness myself: What rapt attention surrounded him in that small dining-room-cum-drawing-room when he spoke, standing in slippers and house-jacket, leaning against the corner stove of glazed pottery, cigar between his fingers, his eyes pursuing, as though drawing inspiration from them, the smoke's meandering curves. One might have thought he sought to tinge his words with their fugitive azure. The lamp's rosy glow slumbered on the table. Behind him, his portrait by Whistler seemed to dissolve into a haze of dreams. Mallarmé spoke sotto voce, in a tone of confidence.

"Conversation sprang up readily," writes Albert Mockel. "Without affectation, punctuated by silences, it ascended of its own accord to those elevated regions where solemnity dwells."

"A silence," adds Henri de Régnier, "then the hieratic gesture would turn familiar. The marvellous sketch would scatter into light sketches; lofty theory would garland itself with charming anecdotes which, exquisite in their grace or delightful in their mischief, earned a just and measured laugh."

"One entered Mallarmé's rooms," writes a poet of the succeeding generation, André Gide; "it was evening; one found there, first, a profound silence; at the threshold, all the clamour of the street expired. Mallarmé began to speak in a soft, musical, unforgettable voice!... Extraordinary thing: he thought before speaking. And for the first time, in his presence, one sensed, one touched the reality of thought; what we sought, what we desired, what we adored in life existed; here was a man who had sacrificed everything to it."

Have you marked in Gide's quotation that phrase: "One found there, first, a profound silence"? One feels in it the poets' yearning to withdraw from the tumult and futile agitations of the street. This profound silence marks the threshold of another world. Reality no longer signifies. We have reached the doctrine's heart. Schopenhauer has spoken. The world exists only as representation. The world is the soul's creation. The poet's purpose is not to render what he sees, but what he feels. Everything occurring around him "intervenes only as pretext for his songs", as Moréas puts it, and Édouard Dujardin reminds us, inscribing as epigraph to his *Hantises* (1886): "Our soul alone lives", citing for authority this thought from Gourmont:

"The sole excuse a man has for writing is to write himself, to unveil to others the particular world that mirrors itself in his individual glass."

And these words from Régnier:

"This idealism is the metaphysical key to most of the spirits who comprised the Symbolist school."

The Symbolists made silence their native country. They dwell in that shadow where, says Vielé-Griffin, "Vigny and Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé walked side by side", and he continues:

"This shadow where Verhaeren lives, where Laforgue died, was for those alongside whom I came to consciousness of life, like the shade beneath laurels. We delighted there, for the place was cool and solitary, before Verlaine's hearse, drawing in its wake a strange horde, raised there the bitter dust of publicity. Thus was our solitude violated. Know you that one fears to name too loudly him whom one esteems, lest fame carry him off and corrupt and annihilate him."

And he concluded with the cry: "Is there no defence against fame?"

I could multiply quotations endlessly. I could harvest them from Bernard Lazare, from Camille Mauclair, from Charles Morice, from Rodenbach, from Charles Maurras, from Théodore de Wyzewa, from Pierre Quillard... even from Jules Lemaître himself, who discerns in Mallarmé "a good Platonist".

Is it not miraculous that Mallarmé should have succeeded in imposing himself upon such diverse intellects, that he could furnish wherewithal to seduce at once the realist Huysmans and the mystic Le Cardonnel, advocates of social art like Gustave Kahn and dilettantes like Henri de Régnier, ironists of Laurent Tailhade's temper and moralists of the stamp of Rémy de Gourmont or André Gide, and that he could equally command the attention of the extremists of "symbolism" and a mind as lucid as Moréas?

How did Mallarmé, a Parnassian who revered prosodic conventions to the point of obsession, come to merit such infatuation from the vers-libristes? How to account for this enchantment? Was it solely through the magic of his speech, which induced in his listeners "a kind of intellectual intoxication"? Was it youth's need to admire and crown the first guide encountered on its path, as André Gide suggests when he writes:

"Leconte de Lisle was dead, Rimbaud vanished, Verlaine haggard, impossible to pin down. Heredia's conversation, all wit and sparkle, offered little nourishment. Sully-Prudhomme was on the wrong track. Where could one turn?... Whom to admire, in heaven's name, if not Mallarmé!"

There is something in this, doubtless, yet something more besides. For Mallarmé to wield such influence, there had to be more than personal magnetism and happy circumstance. There had to be the force and irresistible pull of a truth.

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Mallarmé belongs to a generation saturated with Renan and taught by Flaubert and the Goncourts to scorn public affairs. He harboured no concern for political or religious dogmas, thereby eliminating a vexing source of discord. His nebulous idealism accommodated itself to all creeds. If he expressed doubt, it was no longer with Musset's aggressive anguish, but with Vigny's stoic resignation or, better still, with Gautier's fatalistic detachment:

L'espace a pour jouet le cri: Je ne sais pas.
[Space toys with the cry: I know not.]

His conviction was that the poet serves as civilisation's architect and that without him, the world would be mere darkness and chaos. Here was the truth, already embodied in the ancient myth of Orpheus, city-builder, around which his dialectical fancy played. Harmony creates the universe and establishes its laws. Mallarmé's idealism harks back to the conception of Plotinus.

Poetry, in his view, is life's transposition from fact to ideal.

One must rigorously exclude from it the real, being base, and mistrust any precise assertion as a rash negation.

Le sens trop précis rature
Ta vague littérature.

[Too precise a meaning erases
Your vague literature.]

Thus he came to declare to Edmond de Goncourt, who records it in his journal: "The book is the word in the figure of silence", and again: "A poem is a mystery whose key the reader must discover". He sought to "embody abstraction" and to this end conceived of replacing instrumental music with the music of "intellectual speech at its zenith".

The virtue of his teaching lay in this: he urged poets to:

1° Be dazzled by their faith;

2° Give a purer sense to the words of the tribe.

When fame arrived, Mallarmé found himself compelled to descend from his ivory tower and expand his horizons. It is one thing to murmur words to oneself in solitude by the hearth, quite another to proclaim them in the open when one knows oneself heard and assumes responsibility for souls. Mallarmé had verged on regarding Art as a mandarin's pastime or, if you will, a speculation for initiates. He now began to dream of a poetry that would educate the masses through theatre, though dance and pantomime would form its sole means of expression.

This proved, as has been observed, an evolution of thought that yielded nothing for poetry, since Mallarmé was past the age for beginning life afresh. The poet in him had spent his breath and would manifest himself thereafter only at long intervals through occasional sonnets. Mallarmé would write little now but prose. Thus dawned the era of *Divagations*.

And this explains the contradiction between the theorist and the published poet. This explains why unanimity among Mallarmé's disciples dissolves when, liberated from his spoken word and released from the spell of his presence, they hear him only through his books.

It is perfectly clear that Mallarmé achieved only partial realisation in his verse. He left us mere fragments—sparse ones at that. These are, as he himself regarded them, sketches, attempts, hints rather than finished works. Yet admirable verses flash out here and there, verses possessed of all the vividness and suggestive power of true imagery.

René Ghil, in the preface to his first collection, called for verses that would be:

.... a meadow where lucerne breathes its scent — pale, sea-green water spreading its ripples wide; verses that would capture the inexpressible memory, before an Ancestress's great pale cold eyes, of a winter evening watched over by an icy moon; verses that would hold the thousand whispers of the dark hours, a sharp upon the violin, voices in the night, the tang of sea wind; verses that would render the sick revulsion of migraine, the blind and sluggish weight of an August afternoon, with that strange satiety born of ripened harvests.

And René Ghil went on:

Only one poet, one great poet possesses such verses: Stéphane Mallarmé. Here is a dreamer who pours into his singular dream the very blood of his veins and his living memory of earth. He is a realist. His words are light itself, chiaroscuro, woodland depths pulsing with warmth.…[30]

René Ghil discovered all this in *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, but the same René Ghil would soon be first to denounce both the gulf between Mallarmé's writing and his spoken word, and the dubious originality of his stance. By 1889 he would declare:

"Monsieur Stéphane Mallarmé has conceived a work spanning many volumes, yet not a single book of it has been written. What he says of it reveals that this work's founding principle is utterly unoriginal and that it can only unfold as an exceedingly ingenious and interesting compilation—recreated by a poetic, delicate and supremely subtle mind—of ideal conceptions arrived at a priori.

Thus one of the generative books amounts to working out, through nature descriptions, this proposition: Were man not to exist, nothing would be. Kant, Fichte, and Hegel might stake their claims here.

One utterance by Monsieur Mallarmé finally reveals where his thought comes to rest: 'We cannot do without Eden.'

Yet one idea of truth dominates him: the Symbol—though in his detached poems, particularly those recent sonnets written expressly to demonstrate this idea, it emerges as nothing more than a curious game, rather childish and false. (Recall those descriptive sonnets about a console table, a bed... where the poet bent all his efforts to describing these furnishings without ever naming them.)

But Monsieur Mallarmé has often spoken sternly and magnificently of the true symbol. It's perfectly true that everything is relative and that each phenomenon finds its eternal explanation in another, and our will must strive to penetrate as many relations as possible, so that, should we discover them all, we might thus arrive at the first cause.

Only—how peculiar to affect to be inventing this... and to think that a supposedly revolutionary school chose to stake its existence on this alleged discovery!"

Monsieur René Ghil seizes this opportunity to wage war against the Symbolist school, from which he was keen to distinguish himself, and undertakes to prove that his symbolism, being of a philosophical order, has nothing whatsoever to do with this so-called symbol that amounts to nothing more than a parade of successive images.

A bona fide Symbolist, Monsieur Viélé-Griffin, concurs with René Ghil in condemning Mallarmé, though for different reasons. He resents him for having "darkened within us the sense of clarity". And another true-blue Symbolist, Monsieur Adolphe Retté, declares that Mallarmé was "Symbolism's great mistake".

"Here," he wondered, "is a man who achieved fame for not having written the work heralded for ten years as destined to encapsulate, in definitive form, both the human soul and the universal soul. He spent his life republishing ten sonnets, six somewhat longer poems, fifteen prose poems, a scene from a tragedy, and a handful of theoretical fragments. By his own admission, these were merely trials, the foundation stones of an edifice forever deferred, whose plan and import he would occasionally expound, but which he would not—or rather could not—construct.

The root of this impotence lies in Mallarmé's declaration that he was 'competent in nothing but the absolute'; yet the absolute cannot be realised.

Starting from the eccentric principle that 'to name an object is to destroy three-quarters of a poem's pleasure, which lies in the delight of gradual divination', he confined himself to treating only through allusion those verses and prose pieces he submitted to his readers' acumen... He charges words with inadequately representing his concepts. On the one hand, he holds them in such contempt that he prefers to even a sublime text blank pages adorned with a pattern of commas and full stops. Yet on the other, he assigns them an unprecedented function that had occurred to no one before: 'One must,' he says, 'from several vocables forge a total word, new, alien to the language and quasi-incantatory... which produces in us that surprise of never having heard such an ordinary fragment of speech whilst the reminiscence of the object named bathes in a novel atmosphere.'"

And Retté, a Romantic to his bones despite himself, rebels against this claim to a special language, convinced as he is that the poet's role consists in depicting, through striking images, his personal joys and sorrows in such a way that they offer everyone a faithful rendering of our common joys and sorrows.

Yet another poet, one of those who followed Mallarmé's teaching with the keenest attention and deepest reverence, Paul Valéry, credits him with precisely what Retté condemns, illuminating for us the genesis of one of the master's most impenetrable pieces: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*.

"When Mallarmé," Paul Valéry writes, "having read me his Coup de dés in the plainest manner imaginable, as mere preparation for a greater surprise, finally directed my attention to its layout, I seemed to behold the figure of a thought, placed for the first time in our space... Here, truly, extension spoke, dreamed, brought forth temporal forms. Expectation, doubt, concentration became visible things. My gaze encountered silences that had assumed corporeal form. I contemplated at leisure priceless instants: the split second during which an idea startles, gleams, extinguishes itself; the atom of time, seed of psychological centuries and infinite consequences, appeared at last as beings, wholly surrounded by their palpable nothingness. Here were murmurs, insinuations, thunder for the eyes, an entire spiritual tempest conducted from page to page to the uttermost reach of thought, to a point of ineffable rupture; there, the marvel manifested itself; there upon the paper itself, some scintillation of ultimate stars trembled infinitely pure in the same inter-conscious void where, like matter of an unknown species, distributed in clusters, streams, systems, the Word coexisted!"

"Don't you find," Mallarmé had asked Paul Valéry, showing him the proofs of Un coup de dés, "that this is an act of madness?" Valéry deemed it, quite the contrary, a marvellous undertaking. The revelation came to him that very evening, as he contemplated, in the Valvins countryside, "the incomparable July sky, whilst walking alongside the poet beneath the Serpent, the Swan, the Eagle and the Lyre". He received the impression that Mallarmé's text was patterned after the text of the universe, "that text of clarities and enigmas which speaks and does not speak, which affirms and denies". He discovered there the same chaos of erasures and overwrites, the same creation ex nihilo, and could not resist the thought that Mallarmé "had attempted to elevate a page, at last, to the power of the starlit heavens".

Don't be too quick to smile. However fanciful Paul Valéry's hypothesis may seem, it remains plausible. Didn't Hugo harbour the ambition to model his work upon the universe, and wasn't it the eternal struggle between good and evil enacted there that prompted his technique of antithesis? Paul Valéry may well have strayed into his own reverie whilst believing he followed Mallarmé, and succeeded only in interpreting himself, but his hymn of praise deserved recording. This is hardly the first attempt

to interpret Mallarmé, of course. His obscure passages have never wanted for scholiasts exercising their ingenuity, yet of all their contradictory readings, not one has carried the day—and what do these attempts at clarification matter, after all, when even Coppée, that champion of clarity, admits that "the charm of Mallarmé's verses, even when their meaning escapes us, works upon us and penetrates us like music or perfume"? The final word belongs to Remy de Gourmont: "Where Mallarmé's poetry achieves beauty, it remains incomparably so."

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Jules Laforgue maintains that Mallarmé belongs solely to the Parnassian consciousness, of which he was "the apotheosis", and André Gide shares this view, meaning that he considers him not an innovator but rather the apex and culmination of the Parnassian movement. Moréas, after years of admiring Mallarmé, declared towards the end: "I shall never open his books again". Yet more than a quarter-century after his death, the intellectual youth who have cheerfully buried Parnassianism and are now bent on burying Symbolism still preoccupy themselves with Stéphane Mallarmé. His troubling, sphinx-like presence looms ever larger with time's passage, rising more insistently than ever on the horizon. André Thérive detects his influence even amongst today's neo-classicists. Albert Thibaudet dedicates a major study to him, whilst Paul Souday, who rarely loses himself in clouds, calmly reassures those haunted by fears of being hoodwinked: "One may admire Mallarmé"—and this very morning (1920), Poizat, a prudent soul little given to adventures, writes in his *Histoire du Symbolisme*: "No poet deserves the title of master, so freely bestowed, more than Mallarmé."

Albert Mockel once proclaimed: "Mallarmé is a hero" (*Le Journal*, 19 September 1898), and Paul Adam promptly trumped him: "Mallarmé was more than a hero—he was a saint. He worshipped thought to the point of sacrificing every happiness to it." Édouard Dujardin places him amongst the prophets and glimpses through him the fires of Ezekiel[31]. Joachim Gasquet likens him to Prometheus: "Mallarmé," he writes, "through the spectacle of an immense genius gone astray, has instilled in us the taste for heroism and the pressing need for victory."

And so Mallarméism has ceased to be a literary doctrine and become a religion. Gustave Kahn presaged this character from the start when he spoke of:

"Those Tuesday evenings at Mallarmé's, attended with such reverence that one might truly have called them, in the finest sense, a chapel in his fourth-floor rooms on the rue de Rome... Yes, on certain evenings one might have imagined oneself in one of those churches, tucked away on a fifth floor or deep in a courtyard, where the manna of a new faith was dispensed to the faithful."

Here criticism can only bear witness. Articles of faith lie beyond dispute. That said, we remain free, as Moréas urged, to close Mallarmé's books for good. Let the mystics grapple with this phantom poetry and shape it to their image. Just so do clouds unfurl across the sky a procession of shifting forms that each observer reads as they please. Why dissect Mallarmé's work seeking justification for such extraordinary fervour? To have provided its pretext would suffice for his glory, and if, as some maintain, the poet harboured mystifying intentions, we must acknowledge that chance conspired to defeat them. In that case, Mallarmé would have succeeded only in fooling himself.

Conclusions

We have reached the second waystation in our journey through the Symbolist movement. The decade of the 1890s opened with its triumph—but the Tarpeian Rock lies perilously close to the Capitol. At the Moréas banquet, Maurice du Plessys's toast struck a jarring note amongst the chorus of celebration. His *Dédicace à Apollodore* already sounded the Roman challenge. Du Plessys knew that Moréas was wavering, poised to break with the School. Moréas had come to see that Symbolism, however timely its intervention, bore merely the marks of a transitional art; to follow it blindly meant not reaching the Promised Land but stumbling into a cul-de-sac. Thus, on the very day Symbolism believed itself secure in its cohesion and final victory, a hairline fracture presaged the coming schism. Moréas's defection would sting all the more keenly for their having just crowned him leader. Soon after the banquet came his disavowal, taking form as the manifesto of the École Romane[32]. This manifesto answered so pressing a need that it triggered a general revolt against the Symbolist School. Hostilities erupted from every quarter, hour upon hour. The École Romane had reclaimed the rights of Tradition; Charles Morice champions the rights of the French Spirit; Fernand Gregh stakes his claim for Humanism. Symbolism would even weather a counter-assault from Naturalism, rechristened Naturism for the occasion by Saint-Georges de Bouhélier. The Parnassians, refusing to concede defeat, reared their heads in 1900, declaring through Mendès that Symbolism's "poetics were already passé and growing long in the tooth."[33] But the most telling blow to its influence would be the triumph of Cyrano de Bergerac, in which Rostand lampoons the precious aesthetes of the "Mercure françois". Much as I admire Edmond Rostand's gifts, I entertain no illusions about what Cyrano's success meant. The Symbolists could perhaps claim, with some justice, to be unscathed by it. Yet the fact remains that the general public was deeply impressed, and many readers who had begun to accommodate themselves to the Symbolist formula seized this excuse to abandon it for good.

The Symbolists scarcely needed this coup de grâce. The lively curiosity they had sparked at their emergence proved a mere flash in the pan. The clamour subsided. Youth was moving on. A new generation was rising—keen on sports and the active life, with scant appetite for metaphysical speculation or prosodic niceties. Faith ebbs away. Enthusiasm wanes.

Into the long-haired Cenacles come young aesthetes, stiff and affected, whose careerist ambitions and sharp practices show plainly they have failed to grasp their elders' example. In place of absolute disinterestedness and artistic integrity, we find the scramble for publicity and cash rewards.

Yet this decade saw a splendid flowering of Symbolist activity. Outstanding poets emerged: Albert Samain, Francis Jammes, Charles Guérin, Paul Fort. But it was darkened by grievous losses (Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé). Before the decade's end, Samain departed, followed to the grave within days by Emmanuel Signoret. It closed with the death of Léon Deschamps, who had rallied their forces in La Plume.

The times are broadly hostile to Poets. Their future grows dim. The Symbolists are not alone in falling prey to public indifference and official prejudice. Moréas offers his Stances to the *Revue des Deux*

Mondes, which spurns them as beneath its dignity, whilst the Académie française denies him the Archon-Despérouse prize his admirers had, unbeknown to him, sought on his behalf. Yet true poets find ready consolation for their contemporaries' blindness. They know their kingdom is not of this world, and that glory seldom flowers save upon graves.

Let no one cite Edmond Rostand against this general indifference. His magnificent Cyrano neither heralded a poetic renaissance nor signalled the public's return to Poetry. Cyrano succeeded in spite of, not thanks to, being in verse. Its success was a surprise coup that would not be repeated. So little does Cyrano demonstrate any public appetite for lyricism that Rostand's other dramas—by no means inferior works—garnered only contested acclaim. The critics sniffed at Chantecler, which may well be his masterpiece. The Comédie-Française itself had spurned Rostand in his early days for the same reason it increasingly neglected our classical tragedians: they commit the unpardonable sin of failing to fill the till. Whether the gods condemned it to flames as punishment for such avarice and irreverence towards the Muses, I cannot say. The Comédie-Française burnt down on 8 March 1900.

Moreover, Rostand is ill. His final exertion with *L'Aiglon* seems to have drained him utterly. He retreats to Cambo, and his friends fear he may never return. Already the merciless boulevard has buried him with a cruel pun: Edmond "À bout" [Spent]. And the theatre slumps back into prose, into its tired old grooves, all the more threadbare when set against the bold ventures of Antoine, Paul Fort and Lugné-Poé. Antoine has become a theatre director. He has his own establishment now, but seems chastened, somehow constrained by his new position. This year he gives us *La Clairière* by Donnay and Descaves, Jules Renard's *Poil de carotte*, and some Courteline. Respectable enough, certainly, but nothing to do with the lyre—and even Courteline's prose strikes the crowd as too highbrow. They turn instead to the vulgar excesses of the café-concert and the titillating dishabille of the music hall. Cinema makes its début, and then there's the circus—the circus with its clowns, acrobats, performing beasts and jugglers; the circus, ever certain to reclaim its prestige in periods of decline. Everywhere, boxing and wrestling tournaments draw eager throngs. The crowd grows passionate about the contestants, laying bets as they do on horses at the track. In 1900, the great Golden Belt championships are mounted, the prize going to the Turkish wrestler Karah-Ahmed. We haven't yet reached the point of erecting statues to the victor, but his likeness gleams from every shopfront, flanked by the new President of the Republic and the latest inductee to the Academy. Wrestling boasts not only its temples but its newspapers and its literature. A celebrated photographer publishes a coveted album featuring our champion wrestlers in naturalibus—bloated with fat, veritable mastodons, amorphous mountains of flesh with breasts like wet-nurses and, for the most part, brutish faces whose sole merit is to prove that physical culture alone cannot bestow upon its devotees the profile of Apollo. Then there are the velodrome gatherings, the bicycle races, the Bordeaux-Paris race, the international Paris-Lyon motor race, and so forth.

Where, amidst this pandemonium, is one to find time to open a book? The newspapers themselves lack the space to report on all these sporting spectacles—how should they find any for matters of the mind? They know, besides, that the masses have no interest. If a handful of papers still maintain a literary column, it's merely to run publishers' paid announcements. Foolish publishers, blind to their folly in killing the goose that lays the golden eggs—domesticating criticism only to strip it of all credibility!

In 1900, the blare of brass bands drowns the poets' voices. The wind carries only merriment. The century lies dying, and we're throwing it a splendid wake. We bury it to the crash of firecrackers and the cacophony of that global bazaar, the Universal Exhibition. "The apotheosis of cosmopolitan prostitution," declares Gabriel Séailles. And indeed it was a monstrous bacchanal, an orgy without restraint where, to perfectly illustrate those morals we've christened "fin de siècle," princesses run off with gypsy fiddlers whilst crowned heads cavort with pubescent dancing girls. France bears no responsibility for such morals. Her people are, granted, light-minded and giddy. In the German section of the Exhibition, they hurry past the Krupp artillery with perfect indifference, only to stand transfixed before the sham marble and papier-mâché monstrosity of the imperial pavilion. Snobbery, with studied affectation, patronises the Teutonic stalls and their gimcrack wares. It makes the German section the sensation of the fair. Nothing is wanting but the Kaiser himself, and our newspapers burst into hymns of praise as though to coax him into making the journey. Why doesn't he follow the Queen of Saxony's example—she whom we've lavished with homage? Can he still bear us a grudge over the Dreyfus business? Surely he knows we've swept all that under the carpet and that the year opened with Paul Déroulède's exile. Oh yes, our people are frivolous, but not nearly so debauched as they pretend. Don't believe their swaggering displays of vice. France remains sound at heart. She has her vast reserves of country folk and city workers. These "fin de siècle" morals aren't truly hers. They belong to the Paris of the boulevards, to cosmopolitan Paris—and even should working Paris temporarily join the revelry, it has the excuse of celebrating the Legion of Honour cross just bestowed upon it[34]. Surely, on such an occasion, even the most upright souls may be forgiven a touch of abandon? France, after all, has every reason to seek relief from the convulsions of the Dreyfus affair. She means to take her holiday. Like Sardou's heroine, that Madame Sans-Gêne who has taken the country by storm for several seasons now —whom Réjane brings to Paris for her thousandth performance after touring her through every provincial town—France, exhausted by Félix Faure's megalomania and his mania for restoring court ceremonial, longs for informality and plain dealing. France plants her elbows on the table. She wants only genial, benevolent faces about her, the countenances of—dare I say it—proper good sorts. At the Élysée, she's installed M. Loubet, whose twinkling eyes and flourishing whiskers reflect, for any who care to look, the bonhomie of Henri IV, that champion of the common man's "chicken in the pot." To preside over the Senate, she's chosen dear old Fallières, with the hearty countenance of a master vintner. Even the Academy, to move with the times, welcomes that eternal student Faguet, so careless of dignity that one encounters him running errands in his quarter, in shirtsleeves, clutching a bundle of greens. The Prefecture of Police, too, was urged to "become more human." True, M. Lépine hadn't much truck with protocol. That sworn enemy of ceremony would head processions in morning coat and bowler, leaving his predecessor M. Lozé frozen in scandalised disbelief. And M. Lépine could smile when he chose, but too often he'd assume an ogre's growl, and that imperial goatee of his was liable, in the heat of demonstrations, to summon unfortunate memories for Parisians. So he's been packed off to Algeria, replaced by that model of reassurance, M. Blanc. And M. Blanc has appointed as chief of staff M. Pujalet, most affable and warm-hearted of men, well-versed in the tenderness of human hearts and skilled in offering sympathy.

At such a juncture, no one objects to the people's pleasures, and the people seize their chance. Why shouldn't they? Nothing but glad tidings reaches them. They're drowning in affordable comfort. M. Lucien March, chief of the national statistics bureau, has determined that the cost of living, which he's tracked since 1875, follows a descending curve, and that in this year of grace 1900, a family of four requires merely the trifling sum of 1,029 francs—neat, no centimes—to balance their yearly accounts.

We're hurtling towards the Golden Age[35]! A few years more and we'll live like lords without spending a sou.

Let's accept the happy portent and cease our churlish resistance to the general jubilation. Away with sourpuss moralists and poets! Let the Muses take a holiday. We'll speak of them tomorrow. They can afford to wait, being immortal. This Universal Exhibition carnival isn't so disagreeable, when all's said and done. With its hodgepodge of palaces and peoples, its Arab bands, its belly dancers, its African dances, its whirling dervishes and Javanese processions, it presents the world in miniature. Lost civilisations spring to life again, mingling with our own, offering their most beguiling smiles, their treasures, their every temptation. Venice clasps hands with Peking. One wanders from an alley in ancient Baghdad to the lanes of old Paris. If the excess of Munich modernism grates by day, come evening it's pure enchantment, a tale from the Arabian Nights. Loie Fuller[tn54] has set the fashion. She's put Scheherazade back in our heads. Nothing but fairy lights wherever one looks, plays of translucent colour and cascading illuminations. The Earth seems suspended in the void, bathed in the rainbow's delicate spectrum.

Scarcely have the Exhibition gates closed than thoughts turn to the next spectacle. The press debates which date to choose. Custom dictates these festivities should recur every decade, but it's become clear that their ever-expanding scale demands a longer incubation. "Suppose we make it twenty years hence?" ventures one voice. "Split the difference!" counters another, and perhaps because he knows the mystical power of seven and its multiples, he champions the year 1914. So 1914 it shall be! The date seems most auspicious and is duly adopted. By then we'll have ample time to prepare our wonders. How prescient that journalist proved, how right to promise that the next gathering of nations would resound even more magnificently! Good God, what a dazzling conflagration awaits! What a glorious cascade of sparks! What a colossal firework display, what a stupendous final holocaust! Rest assured, the blaze will be visible from afar and its reverberations will reach the world's furthest corners. Yes indeed, the tournament of 1914 shall be writ large in History's chronicles!

Poetic Ephemerides

(1891-1900)

1891

• Théodore de Banville: Occidentales. Rimes dorées.

• Jean Ajalbert: Femmes et paysages.

• Émile Blemont: Les Pommiers en fleurs.

• Tristan Corbière: Les Amours jaunes (réédition Vanier).

• Max Elskamp: Dominical.

• Gustave Kahn: Chansons d'amant.

• René Ghil: Le vœu de vivre.

• Francis Jammes: Six sonnets.

• Pierre Louÿs: Astarté.

• Charles Le Goffic: Chansons bretonnes.

• Stuart Merrill: Les Fastes.

• Ephraïm Mikhaël: Œuvres posthumes.

• Albert Mockel: Chantefable un peu naïve.

• Maurice du Plessys: Dédicace à Apollodore.

• Henri de Régnier: Épisodes, sites et sonnets.

• Georges Rodenbach: Le Règne du silence.

• Arthur Rimbaud: Le Reliquaire.

• Emmanuel Signoret: Le Livre de l'amitié.

• Fernand Séverin: Le Don d'enfance.

• Laurent Tailhade: Au pays du mufle. — Vitraux.

• Paul Verlaine: Bonheur.

• Daniel de Venancourt: Les Adolescents.

• Max Waller: La Flûte à Siebel.

Revues: L'Art social (Gabriel de la Salle). — La Revue blanche (Alexandre Natanson). — La Revue de l'Évolution. — Chimère (Paul Redonnel). — Le Carillon (L. de Saunier).

1892

- Théodore de Banville: Dans la fournaise.
- Sully Prudhomme: Réflexions sur l'art des vers.
- Édouard Dubus: Quand les violons sont partis.
- Max Elskamp: Dominical.
- André Fontainas: Les Vergers illusoires.
- Francis Jammes: Vers.
- Paul Gérardy: Chansons naïves.
- Robert de Montesquiou: Les Chauves-souris.
- Maurice du Plessys: Le Premier livre pastoral.
- Henri de Régnier: Tel qu'en songe.
- Arthur Rimbaud: Les Illuminations.
- Edmond Rostand: Les Romanesques.
- Han Ryner: Les Chants du divorce.
- Robert de Souza: Le Rythme poétique.
- Paul Verlaine: Liturgies intimes.
- Robert de la Villehervé: Les Âmes fleuries.

Revues: Le Chasseur de chevelures (Tristan Bernard). — La Croisade (Émile Boubert). — L'Idée libre (Émile Besnus). — La Joute (Masson Darboy). — Le Livre d'art (Paul Fort). — Le Mouvement littéraire (Fernand Roussel). — Le Saint Graal (Emmanuel Signoret). — Psyché (V. Émile Michelet). — La Syrinx (Joachim Gasquet). — La Revue jeune (Maurice Pujo). — L'Art et l'Idée (Octave Uzanne). — L'En dehors (Zo d'Axa). — Les Essais d'art libre (Edmond Coutances). — Les Essais des jeunes (Emmanuel Delbousquet). — Floréal (Paul Gérardy). — Le Réveil, Flandre et Wallonie (Max Elskamp-Gérardy-Maeterlinck). — The Pagan Review, parodie anglaise des revues symbolistes françaises (Rudgwick — Sussex).

1893

- Auguste Dorchain: La Jeunesse pensive.
- Max Elskamp: Salutations dont d'angéliques.
- Charles Guérin: Fleurs de neige.

- Valère Gille: Le château des Merveilles.
- José Maria de Heredia: Les Trophées.
- Ferdinand Hérold: Chevaleries sentimentales.
- Stéphane Mallarmé: Vers et prose.
- Jean Moréas: Autant en emporte le vent.
- Saint-Pol Roux: L'Âme noire du prieur blanc.
- Albert Samain: Au Jardin de l'infante.
- Paul Verlaine: Odes en son honneur.
- Émile Verhaeren: Les Campagnes hallucinées.
- Francis Vielé-Griffin: La Chevauchée d'Yeldis.

Revues: L'Académie française (St-Georges de Bouhélier). — Le Cœur (Jules Bois). — La Croisade (Émile Boubert). — Le Procope (Théo). — La Revue anarchiste (Charles Chatel et André Ibels). — L'Ère nouvelle (Georges Diamandy). — L'Escarmouche (Georges Darien).

1894

- Auguste Dorchain: Vers la lumière.
- François Fabié: Les Voix rustiques.
- André Fontainas: Nuits d'Épiphanie.
- Paul Fort: Plusieurs choses. — Premières lueurs sur la colline. — Monnaies de fer.
- René Ghil: L'Ordre altruiste.
- Rémy de Gourmont: Hiéroglyphes.
- Charles Guérin: Joies grises.
- Jules Laforgue: Poésies complètes.
- Pierre Louÿs: Les Chansons de Bilitis.
- Hugues Lapaire: L'Annette.
- Camille Mauclair: Sonatines d'automne.
- Jean Moréas: Ériphyle.
- Robert de Montesquiou: Le Chef des odeurs suaves.
- Hugues Rebell: Chants de la pluie et du soleil.
- Léon Riotor: Le Pêcheur d'anguilles.

- Emmanuel Signoret: Daphné.
- Édouard Schuré: La Vie mystique.
- Robert de Souza: Fumerolles.
- Paul Verlaine: Dans les Limbes. — Épigrammes.
- Francis Vielé-Griffin: Παλαι.

Revues: Le Centaure (Henri Albert). — Le Magazine international (Léon Balzagette). — L'Idée moderne (Nicole Chambellan). — L'Ymagier (Rémy de Gourmont et Alfred Jarry). — Les Ibis (Degron et Klingsor). — L'Album des légendes (A. et J. des Gachons). — L'Art littéraire (Louis Lormel). — La Revue et l'Idée (Maurice Leblond). — Pages littéraires (Genève).

1895

- Henri Barbusse: Les Pleureuses.
- Henry Bataille: La Chambre blanche.
- Émile Blémont: La Belle Aventure.
- Aristide Bruant: Dans la Rue.
- Max Elskamp: En symbole vers l'Apostat.
- Paul Fort: Presque les doigts aux clés. — Limbes de lumière. — Il y a là des cris.
- André Fontainas: Les Estuaires d'ombre.
- Gustave Kahn: Domaine de fée. — La pluie et le beau temps.
- Leconte de Lisle: Derniers poèmes.
- Maurice et André Magre: Éveils.
- Stuart Merrill: Petits poèmes d'automne.
- Alfred Mortier: La Vaine Aventure.
- Camille Mauclair: Couronne de clarté.
- Robert de Montesquiou: Le Parcours du rêve au souvenir.
- Edmond Rostand: La Princesse lointaine.
- Lionel des Rieux: Les Amours de Lyristès.
- Arthur Rimbaud: Poésies complètes.
- Yvanhoe Rambosson: Le Verger doré.
- Henri de Régnier: Aréthuse. — Poèmes (1887-1898).
- Ernest Raynaud: Le Bocage.

- Adolphe Retté: L'Archipel en fleurs.
- Fernand Séverin: Un Chant dans l'ombre.
- Raymond de La Tailhède: La Métamorphose des Fontaines.
- Daniel de Venancourt: Le Devoir suprême.
- Émile Verhaeren: Almanach. — Les Villages illusoires. — Les Villes tentaculaires.
- Francis Vielé-Griffin: Poèmes et poésies.

Revues: L'Action (Otto). — Arte (Eugénio de Castro). — L'Art jeune (Van Lerberghe). — Le Livre des légendes (Jacques des Gachons). — Nib (Tristan Bernard). — Le Coq rouge (Demolder). — La Coupe (Richard Weman). — La Critique (Georges Bans). — L'Enclos (F. Vincent et H. Samon). — L'Épreuve littéraire (Henri Albert).

1896

- Léon Dierx: Poésies complètes.
- Max Elskamp: Six chansons du pauvre homme.
- Anatole France: Poésies complètes.
- Paul Fort: Ballades.
- Ferdinand Hérold: Intermède pastoral.
- André Lemoyne: Fleurs du soir.
- Jean Moréas: Poésies (1886-1896).
- Robert de Montesquiou: Les Hortensias bleus.
- Maurice du Plessys: Études lyriques.
- Maurice Rollinat: Les Apparitions.
- Georges Rodenbach: Les Vies encloses.
- Emmanuel Signoret: Vers dorés.
- André Theuriet: Poésies.
- Hélène Vacaresco: L'Âme sereine.
- Émile Verhaeren: Poèmes. — Les Heures claires.
- Paul Verlaine: Chair. — Invectives.

Revues: L'Aube (P. Guédy). — Le Livre d'art (Paul Fort). — La Revue rouge (Gustave Lenglet). — La Province nouvelle (Laurent Sauvigny). — La Coopération des idées (G. Deherme). — L'Effort (Maurice Magre).

1897

- Barbey d'Aurevilly: Poussières.
- Albert Boissière: L'Illusoire Aventure.
- Henry Bataille: Ton sang.
- Henry Cazalis: Poésies.
- Léonce Depont: Sérénités.
- André Fontainas: Crépuscules.
- Paul Fort: Ballades françaises.
- Fernand Gregh: La Maison de l'enfance.
- Charles Guérin: Sonnets et un poème.
- Ferdinand Hérold: Images tendres et merveilleuses.
- Francis Jammes: La Naissance du poète.
- Gustave Kahn: Premiers poèmes. — Le Livre d'images.
- Sébastien-Charles Leconte: L'Esprit qui passe. — Le Bouclier d'Arès.
- Charles Le Goffic: Sur la Côte.
- Jean Lorrain: L'Ombre ardente.
- Stuart Merrill: Poèmes (1887-1897).
- Frédéric Plessis: Vesper.
- Léon Riotor: Fidelia.
- Edmond Rostand: Cyrano de Bergerac.
- Ernest Raynaud: Le Signe (nouvelle édition).
- Henri de Régnier: Les Jeux rustiques et divins.
- Charles de Saint-Cyr: Les Frissons.
- Robert de Souza: Sources vers le Fleuve.
- Francis Vielé-Griffin: Clarté de vie.

Revues: L'Œuvre (Jules Nadi). — La Revue naturiste (Henri Stoel). — Le Spectateur catholique (Edm. de Bruijn). — Le Thyrse. — La Trêve-Dieu (Yves Berthou). — Comme il nous plaira (Georges Rency). — Matines (Serge Basset). — Anthologie-Revue (Edward Sansot).

1898

- Max Elskamp: La Louange de la vie. — Enluminures.
- Paul Fort: Montagne.
- René Ghil: Dire des Sangs.
- Rémy de Gourmont: Les Saintes du Paradis.
- Charles Guérin: Le Cœur solitaire.
- Francis Jammes: Quatorze poèmes. — De l'Angélus de l'aube à l'Angélus du soir.
- Maurice Magre: La Chanson des hommes.
- Adolphe Retté: Poésies.
- Yvanhoe Rambosson: La Forêt magique.
- Paul Souchon: Élévations poétiques.
- Achille Ségard: Le Départ à l'aventure.
- Georges Rodenbach: Le Miroir du ciel natal.
- Albert Samain: Aux Flancs du vase.
- Francis Vielé-Griffin: Phocas le jardinier.
- Charles van Lerberghe: Entrevisions.

Revues: L'Aube méridionale: Montpellier. — La Cité d'art (Clément-Lanquine).

1899

- Émile Blémont: En mémoire d'un enfant.
- Édouard Ducoté: Le Chemin des ombres heureuses.
- Paul Fort: Le Roman de Louis XI. — Les Idylles antiques. — L'Amour marin.
- Charles Guérin: L'Éros funèbre.
- Fernand Gregh: La Beauté de vivre.
- Rémy de Gourmont: Oraisons mauvaises.
- Ferdinand Hérold: Au Hasard des chemins.
- Francis Jammes: Le Poète et l'Oiseau. — La Jeune Fille nue.
- Sébastien-Charles Leconte: Les Bijoux de Marguerite.
- Charles Le Goffic: Le Bois dormant.

- O.-W. Milosz: Le Poème des Décadences.
- Jean Moréas: Les Stances.
- Robert de Montesquiou: Les Perles rouges.
- Stéphane Mallarmé: Poésies complètes.
- Ernest Raynaud: La Tour d'ivoire.
- Henri de Régnier: Premiers poèmes.
- Léon Riotor: Jeanne de Beauvais.
- Yvanhoe Rambosson: Actes.
- Emmanuel Signoret: La Souffrance des eaux.
- Robert de Souza: Modulations sur la mer et la nuit.
- Fernand Séverin: Poèmes ingénus.
- Laurent Tailhade: À travers les groins.
- Émile Verhaeren: Les Visages de la vie. — Poèmes (3e série).

Revues: Germinal (Louis Raymond). — Le Pays de France (Joachim Gasquet).

1900

- Catulle Mendès: Les Braises du cendrier.
- Stuart Merrill: Les Quatre saisons.
- Edmond Rostand: L'Aiglon.
- Saint-Pol Roux: La Rose et les Épines du chemin.
- Emmanuel Signoret: Le Premier Livre des Élégies.

Revues: Le Sagittaire (Ernest Raynaud).

Author‘s Notes

1. Jules Huret: *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (Fasquelle, édit.).

2. Ernest Constans, then Minister of the Interior and deeply unpopular.

3. *Les Cornes du Faune*, which came off the press on 15 December 1890, was not released for sale until January 1891. The same applies to Jean Moréas's *Le Pèlerin passionné*.

4. M. Camille de Sainte-Croix, upon whom had fallen the good fortune of possessing the manuscript of the Valentines, had begun its publication in 1891 in the former journal *La Bataille*. He was obliged to interrupt it forthwith upon the express prohibition of Germain Nouveau, who had got wind of it—one knows not how—in his distant exile. In 1904, another manuscript by Germain Nouveau, Savoir aimer, was published without his knowledge under the auspices of the Société des poètes français. Out of a final scruple, and to spare the poet's morbid sensibilities, the precaution had been taken of disguising his name under the pseudonym Humilis. A generous intention had presided over this publication and served as its excuse. It was hoped to obtain from the Académie française a monetary prize which the author's destitution necessitated and which would have been conveyed to him by indirect means. A wasted effort, as it happened. The Academy did not deem this masterpiece worthy of its approbation. Yet neither its form—of an admirable classical purity—nor its wholly Christian inspiration were of a nature to offend its prejudices. I learn that the manuscript of the Valentines, fortunately recovered, is in the hands of the publisher Messein.

5. Born in 1860: the poets Jules Laforgue, Max Waller. — In 1861: Édouard Dujardin, Charles Morice, Saint-Pol-Roux, Charles Van Lerberghe. In 1862: Grégoire Le Roy, Sébastien Charles Leconte, Maeterlinck, Max Elskamp, Louis le Cardonnel. In 1863: Jules Tellier, Adolphe Retté, Louis Dumur, Stuart Merrill, Jean Ajalbert. In 1864: Henri de Régnier, Francis Viélé-Griffin, Pierre Quillard, Édouard Dubus, Maurice du Plessys, Ernest Raynaud. In 1865: André Fontainas, Ferdinand Hérold, Léon Riotor. In 1866: Ephraïm Mickhaël, Albert Mockel, Gabriel Mourey, Albert Boissière. In 1867: Raymond de la Tailhède, Jean Rictus, Valère Gille, Fernand Séverin. In 1868: Francis Jammes, Hugues Rebell. In 1869: André Gide. Among the preceding generation were Arthur Rimbaud, Rodenbach, and Laurent Tailhade (b. 1854); Verhaeren and Robert de Montesquiou (1855); Moréas and Jean Lorrain (1856); Ivan Gilkin, Albert Samain, and Remy de Gourmont (1858); and Gustave Kahn (1859). The subsequent generation would include Henry Bataille, Paul Fort, Camille Mauclair, André Rivoire, Paul Valéry, and Yvanhoé Rambosson (1872); Daniel de Venancourt, Charles Guérin, and Fernand Gregh (1873).

6. Let us be forgiven this moment of candour—made all the more pardonable by the fact that we have since regained our composure. Our victory offers more than ample proof that, when necessity demands it, our race—ever capable of heroism—can summon the vigour and resolve required. Moreover, the reflections that follow pertain only to a narrow segment of the elite: the arrivistes and the intellectuals.

7. I refer to that particular breed of brasseries—now all but vanished—that once flourished across Paris in the aftermath of 1870. Ostensibly modelled on Alsatian establishments, they were in truth dens of moral dissolution, staffed by peculiar Kellnerinnen, and viewed by some as instruments of German influence. It was whispered that Germany, intent on securing future dominance, had conceived dark designs: to enervate and corrupt French youth through these establishments.

8. Cf. Camille Marx-Lange, *Science et Préscience*, preface by Édouard Schuré (Perrin, éditeur).

9. René Ghil always protested against the Symbolist label. He always fought bitterly against the movement's devotees, and yet who cannot sense that he remains one of its most distinctive prototypes? He played a significant role in this lyrical evolution by steering his disciples toward experiments in "orchestral musicality." Whether he likes it or not, René Ghil belongs to the history of the Symbolist movement, and the anthologies prove it—they take care not to omit him when tallying the School's poets. This itself testifies to the doctrine's essential hollowness, preaching originality at any cost. All the poets who sought to distinguish themselves through individualist intransigence, drawing from their own wells alone, actually subsist on common substance and bear a family resemblance. How can one not consider René Ghil a Symbolist, despite various divergences and his particular modalities, when he proclaimed himself Mallarmé's disciple? The same holds true for Jules Tellier, whom I cite later, who displayed his contempt for Symbolists no less than René Ghil did. He prided himself on working within classical formulas. Yet he too breathed the epoch's poison. What he lacks to be truly classical is serenity, balance. He veers into excessive pessimism, the pursuit of the rare and unprecedented—if not in words, then certainly in sensations. Read the notes he published under the pseudonym Tristun Noël: you'll find there a tormented conscience, confused and troubled feelings, all the Romantic disarray, and that acute subjectivism which stands utterly opposed to the Masters' teachings. And whilst he combated this or that shade of Symbolism, Jules Tellier admitted his devotion to Verlaine and his great admiration for Moréas of the Cantilènes period. Here's where the connection forms. Indeed, we must extend the meaning of Symbolist here to encompass modern poet, otherwise, given the movement's protean character, understanding would become impossible.

10. « *Ah, ce bruit affreux de la vie* » ["Ah, this dreadful noise of life"] Charles Guérin

11. *Nous ne les avons jamais aimées. Ces amusettes du dehors. Nous nous faisons à nous-mêmes nos décors Et nos impudeurs y dansent en almées.* (Camille Mauclair.) [We have never loved them. / These trifles from without. / We create our own backdrops for ourselves / And our shameless acts dance there as almehs.]

12. Cf. Ephraïm Mikhaël: *Chère, je t'ai dit des messes hautaines. Sans y croire* [Darling, I've spoken haughty masses to you. / Without believing in them]

13. Lassitudes is the title Louis Dumur gave to his first collection of verse.

14. Rabindranath Tagore: *L'Offrande lyrique*, translation and preface by André Gide (Nouvelle Revue française).

15. Wells: *Anticipations*, translation by Davray and Kozakiewicz (Mercure de France).

16 Cf. Léon Bloy: *Le Fils de Louis XVI* (Mercure de France). The journal *La Connaissance* (9, galerie de la Madeleine) announces the publication of extracts from Barras's secret memoir, from which it would appear that Louis XVII, whose escape from the Temple is no longer in doubt, died at twenty years of age in Germany. It was there that Naundorff allegedly knew him and received his confidences, which would explain how he came to possess certain particulars and details concerning the escape and the arrest at Varennes, which he employed to establish his credibility in public opinion and impose himself upon his interlocutors. All that remains is to await authentication—itself dubious—of these papers. We should gain a certainty, but the poets would lose a splendid wellspring of pathos. We know that Verlaine had sketched a Louis XVII in verse. I myself had undertaken to write a tragedy on this subject. Nothing remains but to cast my sights elsewhere, unless... but shall we ever know the final word on this affair?

17. The lack of Christian charity was so characteristic of the Church's apologists at this time that the *Petit Bottin des Lettres et des Arts*, published by Giraud in 1886, sketched the following schema under the entry "Catholics": Charles Buet. — Nicolardot is a scoundrel. Nicolardot. — Buet is a scoundrel. Bloy. — You're both shameless scoundrels. Joséphin Péladan. — And what about you! All. — Scoundrels! Scoundrels! Scoundrels!

18. Cf. René Martineau: *Un vivant et deux morts* (Bibliothèque des Lettres françaises), Paris, 1914.

19. Maurice Barrès, Stanislas de Guaita (Paris: Chamuel, 1893).

20. Let us not forget that Racine narrowly escaped being implicated in a witchcraft trial, that he was accused of involvement in the Black Mass affair during the Montespan scandal—which earned him royal disgrace—and that Victor Hugo, a devotee of spiritualism, delighted in table-turning at Guernsey, all of which demonstrates once again genius's irresistible inclination to lose itself in the avenues of mystery.

21. Contemporary of Alphonse Allais, who remained famous in the Latin Quarter for three generations of students for his madcap hoaxes and mania for bamboozling people.

22. I'm well aware that one risks discredit by putting unflattering words about their contemporaries into the mouths of the dead. If I've managed here to overcome my reluctance, it's because I advance nothing that cannot be verified for accuracy. Catulle Mendès publicly took responsibility for the remarks I report by recording them in his official report on *Le Mouvement poétique français de 1867 à 1900*, published by Fasquelle in 1903, where sceptics may find them for themselves.

23. Cf. Ernest Raynaud, *Baudelaire et la religion du dandysme* (Mercure de France). (N. D. E.)

24. Cf. Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Du Dandysme et de G. Brummel* (1862. Poulet-Malassis).

25. "Do you know," he asked André Gide one day, "why Jesus didn't love his mother?... Because she was a virgin!"

26. Verlaine had died on 8 January 1896. A comprehensive study of his work would be called for here were I not concerned about repetition and redundancy with the one I already published in 1911 as a preface to *L'Assomption de Paul Verlaine*, which appeared from Mercure de France.

27. This early line of Mallarmé's subsequently became: *Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore*. [Abolished bauble of sonorous inanity.]

28. Cf. Anne Osmont. *Le Mouvement symboliste* (Maison du Livre).

29. Laurent Tailhade, *Quelques fantômes de jadis* (« L'Édition française illustrée »).

30. René Ghil, *Légendes d'âmes et de sangs. Préface.*

31. Edouard Dujardin, *De Stéphane Mallarmé au prophète Ezéchiel* (Mercure de France).

32. I have touched upon the Romanist movement in this book only insofar as it was bound up with the Symbolist adventure, reserving for another work a study devoted specifically to it.

33. This earned Mendès the following protest from Gustave Kahn, which appeared in *La Plume* (15 May 1900): "Permit me to counter your charge of poetic ill-health with a modest catalogue. Following the Parnassians—to whom neither Paul Verlaine nor Stéphane Mallarmé belong, since they set themselves apart—we count amongst the new poets: Rimbaud, Laforgue, Rodenbach, Moréas, Verhaeren, Viélé-Griffin, Régnier, Merrill, Mockel, Saint-Paul, Maeterlinck, Gourmont, Bataille, Fort, Morice, Elskamp, Saint-Pol Roux, Gide, Claudel, Rebell, Jammes, Hirsch, Van Lerberghe, Scheffer, Herold, Ghéon, Mauclair, Pilon, Gérardy, Mandelstamm, Ruyters, Lafforgue, Rency, Fontainas, Miloz, Pioch, Réja, Ducoté, Klingsor, Jaloux, Briquel, Rambosson, Souza, d'Avril, Nadi, Chanvin, etc.—and I'm leaving out many. The list would prove too lengthy. I deliberately set aside those new poets who employ Parnassian technique—Quillard, Louÿs, Samain, Tailhade, Gregh, Raynaud, Rivoire, Guérin, S. Ch. Leconte, Degron—of whom one could hardly claim they are Parnassians. Against this roster of poets of free art, let us consider in passing the list of young Parnassians, and once we've noted the fine talents of MM. Jacques Madeleine and Henri Barbusse, whom do you present to us as young poets of your persuasion?... MM. de Bouhelier and Maurice Magre?... Yet even these gentlemen practise a liberated alexandrine."

34. The city of Paris was awarded the Legion of Honour in 1900.

35. The year 1900 brought the treasury a surplus exceeding one hundred million francs—precisely 100,728,096 fr. 77 (Report on the general situation of France).)

Translator‘s Notes
(tn^{x})

1. A major corruption scandal in 1887 involving Daniel Wilson, son-in-law of President Jules Grévy. Wilson was caught selling honours and decorations from the Élysée Palace, including the Legion of Honour. The scandal forced President Grévy to resign and became synonymous with Third Republic corruption—hence Raynaud's term "Wilsonisme."

2. Followers of General Georges Boulanger (1837-1891), a populist military figure who led a nationalist movement threatening the Third Republic in the late 1880s. His support came from a volatile coalition of monarchists, Bonapartists, and radical republicans united only by their opposition to the parliamentary system. The movement collapsed when Boulanger fled to Belgium in 1889 rather than face arrest.

3. On 1 May 1891, French troops fired on striking textile workers in Fourmies (northern France) during a peaceful May Day demonstration demanding an eight-hour workday. Nine people were killed, including four young women and two children. The massacre became a rallying cry for the French labour movement and anarchists.

4. Wagner's opera Lohengrin was banned from the Paris Opera in 1891 due to anti-German sentiment and nationalist protests. This was part of the broader revanchist atmosphere following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). The ban was particularly galling to Symbolists, who revered Wagner.

5. Aggressive, bellicose patriotism—from the British music hall refrain "We don't want to fight but by Jingo if we do..." The term perfectly captures the militant nationalism prevalent in 1890s France, still smarting from the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany.

6. Michel Eyraud was executed by guillotine on 3 February 1891 for the notorious murder of Toussaint-Augustin Gouffé, a Parisian bailiff. Eyraud and his accomplice/mistress Gabrielle Bompard killed Gouffé in July 1889 for his money, hiding the body in a trunk. The sensational case dominated French newspapers and marked the year's beginning with lurid violence.

7. A training theatre where student actors could practise their craft in front of audiences, similar to a conservatoire's public performances. These venues served as proving grounds for emerging talent and experimental productions in late 19th-century Paris.

8. Small, elaborate French pastries or confections typically served at receptions and social gatherings. These bite-sized delicacies—which might include miniature éclairs, fruit tarts, or decorated cakes—were de rigueur at bourgeois soirées of the period.

9. In 19th-century France, an "hôtel meublé" (furnished hotel) was a type of cheap lodging house that rented rooms by the week or month, typically to workers, the poor, and those on society's margins. Unlike modern hotels, these establishments provided basic furnished rooms with minimal services. As Raynaud's description makes clear, this particular hotel also functioned partly as a "maison de passe" - renting rooms by the hour for illicit encounters.

10. Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805), French painter known for his sentimental and moralizing genre scenes, often featuring young women in states of innocence or distress. His works were highly popular in the 18th century and widely reproduced as prints.

11. A man about town who frequents the fashionable boulevards, cafés, and nightspots of Paris. The term captures a particularly Parisian type: the sophisticated urban stroller who makes an art of observing city life, being seen in the right places, and cultivating worldly pleasures. In the 1880s, this meant someone who haunted the grand boulevards of Baron Haussmann's newly redesigned Paris, particularly the Boulevard des Italiens and Boulevard Montmartre, where the most elegant cafés, restaurants, and theatres were located.

12. Rose Caron (1857-1930), celebrated French operatic soprano, particularly renowned for her Wagner interpretations at the Paris Opera. She was one of the most admired singers of her era.

13. The Pavillon d'Armenonville was an elegant restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne, one of the most fashionable dining establishments in late 19th-century Paris. It was a favourite haunt of the wealthy and aristocratic.

14. Elaborate ballroom dances popular in the 19th century, typically performed at the end of formal balls. They involved complex figures with frequent changes of partners and often included party favours and elaborate choreography.

15. These are Latin phrases from Catholic liturgy, specifically epithets traditionally applied to the Virgin Mary in prayers and hymns. In the Litany of Loreto (Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary), she is invoked with these titles among many others.

16. Monera refers to a kingdom in biological classification that includes single-celled, prokaryotic organisms. These organisms, primarily bacteria and archaea, lack a nucleus and other membrane-bound organelles.

17. The Carboniferous is a geological period within the Paleozoic Era, lasting from roughly 359 to 299 million years ago.

18. "Pithecoid" is an adjective that generally means resembling or pertaining to apes, especially anthropoid apes.

19. "From the fountain of pleasures"—a Latin phrase suggesting that even at the very source of earthly delights, one finds disappointment and bitterness. The complete phrase from Lucretius reads "medio de fonte leporum surgit amari aliquid" (from the midst of the fountain of pleasures rises something bitter).

20. Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese, 1534-1549) and Pope Pius V (Antonio Ghislieri, 1566-1572). Both were rigorous enforcers of orthodoxy during the Counter-Reformation. Paul III established the Roman Inquisition in 1542, whilst Pius V, a former Grand Inquisitor himself, was notorious for his severe persecution of heretics.

21. Lourdes became a major Catholic pilgrimage site after Bernadette Soubirous reported Marian apparitions there in 1858. Henri Lasserre's Notre-Dame de Lourdes (1869) was instrumental in popularising the shrine and its reported miracles throughout the Catholic world.

22. "I believe because it is absurd." A paradoxical declaration of faith often attributed to the early Christian theologian Tertullian (c. 155-240 AD), though he never used these exact words. The phrase encapsulates the idea that religious faith transcends and even embraces logical impossibility. Tertullian's actual statement was "it is certain because it is impossible" (certum est, quia impossibile), defending the incarnation and resurrection of Christ against rational objections. The formula became emblematic of fideism—the doctrine that faith is independent of, and may even contradict, reason.

23. 'Knowledge itself is not evil, but its use condemns'—a Latin maxim attributed to Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605), German physician and hermetic philosopher, defending the study of occult sciences on the grounds that knowledge itself is morally neutral; only its application can be good or evil.

24. From the Greek spao (to draw out) and ageiro (to gather), spagyrics is the alchemical preparation of herbal medicines through separation, purification, and recombination of plant essences. The term was coined by Paracelsus to describe his method of creating remedies through alchemical processes.

25. 'Read, read, read and re-read, work and you shall find'—a fundamental alchemical motto emphasising that enlightenment comes through diligent study of texts combined with practical laboratory work. The phrase appears in the Mutus Liber (1677) and other hermetic writings.

26. Essential apparatus in alchemical laboratories. The Athanor (from Arabic al-tannur, 'oven') was a furnace designed to maintain constant heat for extended periods, often called the 'Philosopher's Furnace'. The Aludel was a sublimating vessel, consisting of pear-shaped pots stacked to form a condensing tower for collecting vapours.

27. The Tabula Smaragdina, a brief cryptic text forming the cornerstone of Western alchemical tradition. Purportedly inscribed by Hermes Trismegistus on an emerald tablet and discovered in his tomb, it contains the famous hermetic axiom "As above, so below." The text first appeared in Arabic sources in the 8th century and entered European tradition through medieval Latin translations.

28. The Clavicula Salomonis or Key of Solomon, a Renaissance grimoire of ceremonial magic falsely attributed to King Solomon. The text, which exists in numerous manuscript versions from the 14th century onwards, contains instructions for summoning spirits, creating talismans, and performing ritual operations. Not to be confused with the later Lesser Key of Solomon.

29. The Thesaurus Thesaurorum or Rosarium Philosophorum, a foundational alchemical text. Several works bore this title, most notably a 13th-century treatise attributed to various authors including Albertus Magnus and Arnauld de Villeneuve, containing allegorical descriptions of the philosopher's stone and the stages of the Great Work.

30. 'Thrice-Great Hermes', the legendary author of the Hermetic Corpus, a syncretic figure combining the Greek god Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth. Medieval and Renaissance scholars regarded him as a contemporary of Moses who possessed divine wisdom. The quoted passage paraphrases the Emerald Tablet (Tabula Smaragdina), the foundational text of Western alchemy.

31. Term for Parisian high society.

32. The anarchist bomber whose terror campaign in 1892 gripped Paris.

33. President of France (1895-1899), known for pomp and ceremony.

34. Gabriel Hanotaux, Foreign Minister.

35. Known as "Père la Pudeur" (Father Modesty) for his moral crusades.

36. Louis Lépine, Paris Prefect of Police.

37. Partant pour la Syrie, (Departing for Syria) also known as Le beau Dunois was a national anthem of the Second French Empire, dated to 1807.

38. "Marche Henri IV", alternatively "Vive Henri IV" or "Vive le roi Henri", is a popular French song celebrating King Henry IV of France (also known as Le Bon Roi Henri, "Good King Henry"). The melody was heard of as early as 1581. It was a de facto anthem of the post-Restoration Kingdom of France (the kingdom did not have an official anthem).

39. François Rude's "La Marseillaise" sculpture on the Arc de Triomphe, also known as "The Departure of the Volunteers of 1792.

40. Famous Moulin Rouge can-can dancer.

41. Joseph Pujol, the famous "fartiste" performer.

42. French Marshal court-martialled after the Franco-Prussian War.

43. Son of King Louis-Philippe, presided over Bazaine's trial.

44. Rita Sangalli, Italian ballerina who was a star at the Paris Opera in the 1870s-1880s, famous for her performances in Sylvia and Namouna.

45. Henri Louis Rémy Didon, OP (1840–1900) was a French Dominican friar. He was also a writer, educator, and a promoter of youth sports. His outsize personality often put him in conflict with his religious hierarchy. He coined the term Citius, Altius, Fortius for an 1891 youth sports competition he organized in Arcueil and that his friend Pierre de Coubertin was assisting. The latter proposed it as the official motto of the IOC in 1894.

46. Hyrcania is a historical region composed of the land south-east of the Caspian Sea in modern-day Iran and Turkmenistan, bound in the south by the Alborz mountain range and the Kopet Dag in the east.

47. Giovanni Pico dei conti della Mirandola e della Concordia (1463–1494), known as Pico della Mirandola, was an Italian Renaissance nobleman and philosopher. He is famed for the events of 1486, when, at the age of 23, he proposed to defend 900 theses on religion, philosophy, natural philosophy, and magic against all comers, for which he wrote the Oration on the Dignity of Man, which has been called the "Manifesto of the Renaissance", and a key text of Renaissance humanism and of what has been called the "Hermetic Reformation". He was the founder of the tradition of Christian Kabbalah, a key tenet of early modern Western esotericism. The 900 Theses was the first printed book to be universally banned by the Church. Pico is sometimes seen as a proto-Protestant, because his 900 theses anticipated many Protestant views.

48. a Latin phrase that translates to "about everything and certain other things". It's a playful way of saying one will discuss a wide range of topics, even going beyond the expected scope. It's often used to indicate a broad, perhaps even digressive, discussion.

49. Alcaeus, a Greek lyric poet from Lesbos, was known for composing poems meant to be sung with the accompaniment of a lyre. While he didn't invent the lyre (which was associated with Apollo and the Muses), he frequently mentioned and utilized the instrument in his works, particularly in the context of symposia (drinking parties) and love.

50. a metrical tale, typically a bawdily humorous one, of a type found chiefly in early French poetry.

51. The Boer War, also known as the Second Boer War, was fought between the British Empire and the Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State in South Africa, from 1899 to 1902. The war was rooted in tensions arising from British imperial expansion and the desire of the Boers, descendants of Dutch settlers, to maintain their independence.

52. George "Beau" Brummell (1778-1840) was the archetypal English dandy who dominated Regency society through wit, impeccable dress, and calculated insolence. Friend to the Prince Regent (later George IV) until their famous falling-out, Brummell revolutionised men's fashion by championing understated elegance over ostentation. His influence was such that aristocrats feared his disapproval more than the king's. He died in poverty and madness in a French asylum, having fled England to escape his debts.

53. In Greek mythology, the Shirt of Nessus, Tunic of Nessus, Nessus-robe, or Nessus' shirt was the poisoned shirt (chiton) that killed Heracles. Fearing that Heracles had taken a new lover in Iole, his wife Deianeira gives him the garment, which was stained with the blood of the centaur Nessus. She had been tricked by the dying Nessus into believing it would serve as a potion to ensure her husband's faithfulness. In fact, it contained the venom of the Lernaean Hydra with which Heracles had poisoned the arrow he used to kill Nessus. When Heracles puts it on, the Hydra's venom begins to cook him alive, and to escape this unbearable pain he builds a funeral pyre and throws himself on it. Metaphorically, it represents "a source of misfortune from which there is no escape; a fatal present".

54. Loie Fuller (1862–1928), also known as Louie Fuller and Loïe Fuller, was an American dancer and a pioneer of modern dance and theatrical lighting techniques. Auguste Rodin said of her, "Loie Fuller has paved the way for the art of the future."

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Marko Prekić Kentera is a Belgrade-based poet and literature enthusiast dedicated to making rare and forgotten public domain works accessible through translation, with a focus on the French Symbolist movement. He uses collaborative AI-assisted methods to create these translations, which he shares freely for other readers to discover and enjoy. Other translations include works by/about Stéphane Mallarmé, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Édouard Dujardin, Charles Morice, Octave Mirbeau, Stuart Merrill, René Ghil, Émile Hennequin, Gustave Kahn, Ernest Raynaud and others. These translations are freely available at leonhenniquenovel.com, together with his original poetry and translations of poetry into Serbian.